Miami Workers Center
Innovative center crosses racial divide to mobilize a community

BY MICHAEL KAY

IT IS NEARLY nine o’clock on a balmy Thursday evening, but Gihan Perera, executive director of the Miami Workers Center, is only now heading home. His friend and co-founder Tony Romano, the center’s organizing director, is still in his office. Their long day is no prelude to a lazy Friday: The coming day’s press conference and rally will have them out of bed by 5 a.m.

Eight years ago when Perera and Romano founded the Miami Workers Center, they could not have anticipated the strides their organization would achieve in less than a decade. At the beginning, Perera worked full-time as a graphic designer and Romano held a position at Motorola. Yet they took time to go door-to-door in Liberty City to hear about the issues facing this low-income, predominantly African-American neighborhood that lies north of Miami’s downtown. Seven hundred and fifty community members responded to their survey, affirming the need for a community-based organization to advocate for area residents.

Today, the center occupies two adjoining storefronts in Liberty City where there are 10 employees and a rotating corps of student volunteers and interns. Its achievements extend beyond the immediate area, benefitting many other neighborhoods and projecting the voices of grassroots leaders who are now influencing local and national policy.

The center has won victories in the areas of welfare reform and workers rights. Its most recent triumph, and perhaps its proudest moment to date, is a landmark agreement with the Miami-Dade County government and local housing authority to rebuild 850 units

Continued on page 10

New Naturalization Report
Continued from page 8

Conclusion
A More Perfect Union asserts that U.S. political leaders must decide whether to continue the status quo, laissez-faire approach to naturalization or to implement an immigrant integration initiative that actively promotes citizenship. Failure to act, the report points out, could result in long-term disenfranchisement; inter-generational civic disengagement; political alienation; fragmentation by social class, nationality, and immigration status; a large immigrant underclass; mixed-status families; and immigrant families physically separated for lengthy periods.

The report recommends that the U.S. government—in partnership with foundations, existing networks of immigrant and other community-based organizations, and other key sectors—initiate a national citizenship program to advance immigrant integration. (See Chapter 11 of the report for detailed descriptions of 17 sectors, including philanthropic foundations, and recommendations for each.) The task is great, but the report’s conclusion is clear: Modest and sporadic initiatives will not achieve the necessary goals.

A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan can be viewed and printed in its entirety on the CLINIC website at www.cliniclegal.org/DNP/citzplan.html. CLINIC greatly appreciates the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s generous support for this report.
Miami Workers Center

Continued from page 9

of affordable, low-income housing that were demolished in 2003.

The public-housing redevelopment scandal displaced low-income African-Americans and Latinos and put millions of public dollars at risk. The public tussle triggered a series of hard-hitting articles by the Miami Herald in the summer of 2006 that exposed the misguided transactions and decisions of some local officials. Together with its child organization, Low Income Families Fighting Together (LIFFT), the center mounted a comprehensive campaign that forced the county to meet a long list of demands. The agreement includes a commitment to building 850 units, the return of all displaced residents, a pledge to increase affordable housing for low-income residents, and quarterly accountability sessions between local officials and members of the Miami Workers Center and LIFFT. This outcome will benefit families into the future and further strengthen the groups’ grassroots mobilization endeavors and coalition-building efforts.

“We were originally going to do candidates’ forums around housing and gentrification issues,” Perera explain. “But crisis sometimes takes things in another direction.” In this case, a critical housing emergency created conditions to unite historically divided communities around a common struggle. “Generally, each ethnic minority doesn’t have enough power behind it,” Perera adds. “If you’re fighting for one corner of the world, you’re never going to win.”

Overcoming previous frictions, the center has a successful track record of crossing the racial divide and building alliances among the African-American, Haitian, and Latino communities. It is this multifaceted work and emphasis on uniting diverse populations on common platforms that sets the Miami Workers Center apart from many other worker centers forming across the country. Today, these centers number more than 140, nearly six times the number a decade ago.

“We are different than what most people consider worker centers,” says Perera. “We don’t just focus on workplace issues in our organizing. We traditionally focus much more on community issues.”

Perera and Romano founded the Miami Workers Center after years of experience as political, community, union, and student organizers. Despite the good they were able to accomplish, they felt the impact of those organizing efforts was minimized by their adherence to very specific causes.

“We felt most of the organizing, whether it was community or labor, tended to be very narrow and pragmatic in terms of winning very short-term, narrow victories,” Perera explains. “The more important question to us is how we switch from organizing around a specific need based in someone’s self-interest, like making sure African-American seniors have air-conditioning in their apartments, to organizing power to address structural poverty and racism, issues that cut across nationality and impact the whole class of poor, low-income, and working people.”

The Circle of Consciousness method lies at the heart of the center’s organizing approach. Focusing on themes discussed in a series of four to five meetings, the method aims to educate members in history and politics, provide an analysis of root causes of problems, and raise consciousness on issues that directly affect members’ lives and that may also be global in nature. The sessions often emphasize the importance of developing multi-ethnic solidarity, especially between black and immigrant communities, as a fundamental building block to strengthen a progressive movement for racial and economic justice.

One workshop brought a Latino member from Wynwood—a majority Puerto Rican neighborhood that borders Liberty City—to talk about his experience when he lived in the latter. He explained that when he first moved to Liberty City, he did not always understand cultural differences and often misinterpreted them. But his experience working with African-Americans through the Miami Workers Center enriched his understanding of differences in culture and communications styles.

Sessions that connect global or national events to local circumstances, says Perera, are particularly effective in creating cross-ethnic unity. For example, discussions often address the commonalities between today’s...
Miami Workers Center
Continued from page 10

immigrant rights movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Perera says that talking about issues from a global perspective, as well as making a neighborhood-by-neighborhood comparison, is an effective way to help community members understand that the seemingly isolated problems they face are interconnected and structural in nature. “Members are moving beyond their long-held beliefs about neighboring communities,” says Perera.

Their success on campaigns, such as the agreement recently reached on public housing, will guide them in shaping future activities to expose institutional racism and discrimination against low-income communities. Relationship building will also continue to play a key role in the center’s work. “We find that to make deliberate relationships and deepen interaction between black and Latino members, we have to create space,” Perera says. “Sometimes they have to be separate spaces.”

Linda Sippio, who first came to the Miami Workers Center in May 2003, said the workshops were so fascinating she could not stay away. “It was so interesting I just kept coming... I was hooked,” she says. “[I hope] that I help to make a difference—that I help to make some major changes in the community so that it no longer perceives itself as being hopeless.”

Sippio is now a co-facilitator for the workshops, one of many people within the organization who have risen from a participant to a position of leadership. Such progressions have been integral to the success of the Miami Workers Center. As Perera told the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community, “Leadership development is not part of our organizing model—it is our organizing model.”

Perera emphasizes the importance of Latinos understanding the critical role that African-American leaders play within the local movement. “If we want to be successful at patching together a multi-racial and multi-national progressive power bloc, the most historically disenfranchised community must be at the core and in leadership of the project.”

Dominance of the Spanish-speaking population in Miami—60 percent of Miami-Dade County is Latino according to 2005 U.S. Census data—led Perera and Romano to locate their organization in one of the city’s few African-American communities. This decision enabled them to pitch a racially diverse tent from the beginning.

“In Miami, because of history, there is a deep sense within the African-American community that they’ve been passed over by Cuban leadership and in some ways oppressed,” Perera says. “This perception is underscored not just by the demographic numbers of Latinos in the Miami metro area but also by the overwhelming political power wielded by traditionally conservative Cuban elites.”

By building outward from the Liberty City area, he adds, the center has been better able to negotiate longstanding ethnic tensions, laying the groundwork for multi-ethnic coalition building from the outset.

In 2005, the center reached out to the communities of Little Haiti (predominantly Haitian immigrants), Wynwood (primarily Puerto Ricans), and Allapatah (largely Dominican Republic immigrants). These efforts led to the

Gloria Atkins (left) of Miami en Acción and Yvonne Stratford (right) of LIFFT exemplify the multiracial solidarity among members of the Miami Workers Center.

Continued on page 13
Immigrant Integration Toolkit
Practical strategies, concrete recommendations for grantmakers

After reading these essays on immigrant integration and empowerment, you may wonder how your foundation can begin its own planning. If you don’t already have a copy, the first step you should take is to order GCIR’s Investing in Our Communities: Strategies for Immigrant Integration.

The toolkit was developed through extensive research and interviews with hundreds of foundation, community, business, and government leaders. It incorporates academic research as well as policy and community-based concerns into a resource that also can inform the work of practitioners in the nonprofit, public, and private sectors.

The toolkit offers many practical strategies and resources suggestions on how foundations can contribute to building an immigrant integration infrastructure in their communities. Among them:

- Profiles of more than 75 promising program and policy models that can inform work in local communities in the areas of community planning, language access, English acquisition, education, health and well-being, economic mobility, equal treatment, social and cultural interaction, and civic participation and citizenship.

- A filmography describing recent documentaries that put a human face on complex immigration issues—as well as a DVD of short film clips that can be used to engage foundation colleagues and other stakeholders in productive discussions on immigrant issues. A resources section providing fast facts on immigration, a glossary of terms, an overview of U.S. immigration history, and an annotated listing of recommended readings.

Together, these resources reveal the many ways in which philanthropy can support efforts to engage both newcomers and the receiving communities to partner and build a strong, cohesive society.

Even though comprehensive immigration reform has stalled temporarily in Congress, demographic, economic, and social forces continue to bring immigrants of all backgrounds across our borders.

As such, foundations will increasingly need to address newcomer issues regardless of their funding priorities and geographic focus. Foundations that have not previously supported immigrant integration will find the Promising Practices section a useful resource. “I use the toolkit as a reference to help inform our foundation’s grantmaking, and rely on it as a starting point for exploring possible new program areas to improve the health and well-being of immigrant communities,” said Wendy Yallowitz, program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The integration of immigrants into our society is a major issue that warrants philanthropic attention nationwide. Get your foundations started by visiting our web site at www.gcir.org to purchase a copy, or call our office at 707.824.4374. GCIR staff and board members are also available for presentations and trainings. Contact Alison De Lucca at alison@gcir.org for more information.
Miami Workers Center
Continued from page 11
creation of grassroots community-based organizations. By the beginning of 2006, for example, the Wynwood/Allapatah Anti-Gentrification Committee was formed. Now known as Miami en Acción (MIA), this multiracial organization represents the interests of low-income residents from each of the two neighborhoods. Fifteen residents comprise MIA’s leadership, and the supporter base includes 60 active, low-income residents. The group has launched its first campaign targeting a city-subsidized, commercial/residential development project in their area.

By joining racially diverse populations on commonly shared issues and values, Perera says, everyone prospers because together they have the numerical strength to achieve political power and change. In March 2006, spurred by their experiences at the workers center, a number of black grassroots leaders attended a Miami Justice for Janitors event in support of mostly Latino janitorial workers. “It was not until [the janitors] saw the black leaders come and support them that they said, ‘Oh yeah, we’re going to win,’” Perera says.

Events also draw groups together. In June 2006, center staff and members of LIFFT trekked 16 hours by bus to the South East Social Forum. At the gathering of labor, immigrant, student, and low-income organizations, Miami Workers Center staff found partners among the Black Workers for Justice, the National Jericho Movement, SEIU Local 11, and others. In July of this year, 50 of the center’s members, including representatives of LIFFT and MIA, attended the United States Social Forum in Atlanta.

“We are a big family,” says Paulette Richards, a member of LIFFT, as quoted in a Miami Workers Center report from the Southeast Social Forum. “Even if we didn’t know each other before, we share the same struggle.”

The center’s current campaign against gentrification, Regional Equity for Neighborhoods and Tenants (RENT), is a case in point. Gentrification is causing African-American, Asian, Latino and working-class people to be pushed out of Miami, says Perera. To unite these diverse groups in their common struggle for housing is a challenge.

Last fall and winter, the center and the coalition organized candlelight vigils, negotiated with elected officials, and engaged allies to create and maintain the media and legislative spotlight on gentrification. In October, the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners allocated $19 million to alleviate the housing crisis. Of that sum, $9 million was targeted for rental assistance, and $5 million was slated for upgrading vacant units, underwriting county administrative processing costs, and ensuring that new residents fill public housing openings in a timely fashion.

Joseph Phelan, communications coordinator for the Miami Workers Center, explains, “The County has a fairly poor track record of refilling public housing when it becomes vacant.”

With its expanding base and a growing list of successful campaigns on its resume, the Miami Workers Center continues to cover the waterfront, and remain vigilant of reached agreements while mobilizing grassroots efforts for new campaigns.

Back at the office, as Perera surveys the local and national landscapes, he sees the same solution to a range of community issues. “The most practical answer is power. The only way we’re going to win progressive changes is by uniting a power bloc with enough people and resources to create change.”

Michael Kay is a freelance journalist.

GCIR NEWS
GCIR WELCOMES
the following new members:
Benton Foundation
Dyson Foundation
Fairfield County Community Foundation
Silicon Valley Community Foundation
The Piton Foundation

José González, program officer at the Bush Foundation, was elected as co-chair of GCIR. José joined the GCIR board in 2002 and previously chaired the program committee and the 2004 national convening planning committee.

Sandra Smith, senior community research and grants management officer at The Columbus Foundation, was elected secretary of the GCIR board of directors. She joined the GCIR board in 2002 and previously served as chair of the membership committee.

Frances Caballo joined the GCIR staff as the research and communications director. She was previously executive director of Social Advocates for Youth; director of development and communications at Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa; and staff writer for Sonoma Business Magazine.
MARK YOUR CALENDAR now for June 18-20, 2008 in Chicago! A longstanding immigrant destination with vibrant ethnic neighborhoods, Chicago provides a rich laboratory for exploring barriers and promising approaches to immigrant integration, civic participation, and leadership development. Foundations will glean important insights, lessons, and best practices to guide their work back home.

The convening will focus on some of the most critical immigrant-related issues facing communities across the United States, including:

- Strategies for integrating newcomers into community life.
- Alliance building among immigrants, African-Americans, and other disenfranchised communities.
- The push for comprehensive immigration at the federal level.
- The influence of the immigrant vote on the 2008 elections.
- Effective framing, messaging, and communications on tough immigrant-related issues.

The program will offer a dynamic combination of sessions:

- Plenary sessions will provide a “big picture” perspective that illuminates the social, economic, and political context.
- Workshops will showcase promising models and best practices, particularly those that engage multiple sectors or are crosscutting in approach.
- Learning tours will reveal what is happening on the ground, including challenges and successes.
- Training sessions will help deepen understanding and build concrete skills.
- Film, art exhibits, and live performances will put a human face on complex immigration issues.

While you’re in Chicago, explore Millennium Park, 24 acres devoted to gardens, monumental public art, music, and architecture. The park’s prominent features include a spectacular outdoor concert pavilion designed by Frank Gehry, and the hugely popular Cloud Gate sculpture, above.

Look for electronic updates for GCIR and online registration soon! For more information, please contact GCIR’s program director, Alison De Lucca, at 323.251.6505, or via e-mail at alison@gcir.org.

WIN A SPA TREATMENT!

GCIR is looking for a dynamic, inspirational, powerful keynote speaker to headline our convening and speak on immigrant civic and political engagement. Suggest a speaker and earn a chance to win a spa treatment at the convening hotel! Submit suggestions to alison@gcir.org by October 1, 2007 to be eligible for the drawing!
Perspectives

Continued from back page

The dialogue started in Carson’s essay was continued by Karen K. Narasaki, executive director of the Asian American Justice Center. In The Case for Addressing Race in the Immigration Debate, Narasaki makes the case that race is fundamental to the immigration debate and that only by addressing this issue directly can we ensure America’s ability to live up to the promise of fairness and opportunity for all.

While policymakers, the media, and immigrant communities often view immigration as solely a Latino issue, this typecasting ultimately pits one community against another, fracturing common struggles. Also, while many African-American leaders support immigrant rights as part of the civil rights agenda, Narasaki says that “not everyone is comfortable with the issue.”

Narasaki outlines the concerns many African-Americans have regarding the impact of immigrants on their community’s poverty and unemployment rates, the decrease of investment in public schools and job-training programs—which impacts all American students—and their fear that immigrants are displacing African-Americans in their communities. There is also apprehension that Latino immigrants, like waves of immigrants before them, will move forward, leaving African-Americans behind economically.

The author successfully debunks several myths about the racially diverse immigrant community and suggests that foundations:

- Understand that race is relevant when considering funding strategies.
- Build capacity of African-American CBOs seeking to work on immigration issues.
- Support research that includes a historical and current context for discrimination and the complexities of a global economy.
- Ascertain that immigrant concerns are incorporated when addressing social issues.
- Support collaborative efforts that draw stakeholders together.
- Fund capacity for regular internal discussions, and joint research and problem-solving projects.
- Finance projects that hold the media accountable for the divisive manner in which they frame the issues.
- Sponsor cross-racial projects.
- Invest in a human rights platform that brings diverse communities together.

Eric Ward, national field director for the Center for New Community, writes the culminating essay in this series of issues. In Growing Attacks on Immigrants Have Real Implications for Black America, he writes about his ordeal as an undocumented U.S. citizen, a surprisingly common condition among African-Americans.

After losing his passport and Social Security card at an airport last year, his numerous attempts to replace these documents have proven futile. Although he was born in this country, in four years he will be unable to vote, receive support from domestic entitlement programs, or receive proper identification to travel. According to a Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report from 2006, approximately 2 million African-Americans share his situation.

They are not alone. The center also found that 11 million native-born citizens lack proper identification, and that this phenomenon is twice as likely to occur in low-income populations than among those with higher incomes.

Anti-immigrant legislation further complicates this issue. Voters in Arizona passed a proposition requiring people to produce two forms of identification before being allowed to register to vote. Colorado and Georgia passed similar policies, with more states following their lead. The Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006, scheduled to take effect in 2010, will prohibit U.S. citizens from voting if they are unable to produce a passport, birth certificate, or proof of naturalization.

African-Americans, Ward says, need to realize that the attack on immigrants not only impacts their community negatively but fuels bigotry in this nation, a struggle with which they are familiar. Foundations can counteract the trends, he states, by:

- Helping African-American and immigrant leaders respond in unison to anti-immigrant activity.
- Supporting African-American and immigrant leaders address common issues.
- Recognizing and publicizing the impact of anti-immigrant policies and legislation on African-Americans, the elderly, and the poor.

For more detailed information from all three authors, go to www gcir org, click on resources, and select GCIR publications. Scroll down until you see Perspectives. The next issue of Perspectives will be available this fall.
The importance of race as a fundamental issue of the immigration debate was highlighted in GCIR’s three most recent volumes of Perspectives. Authored by experts in the field, these enthralling essays highlight viewpoints, analyses, and reflections on a range of immigration- and immigrant-related issues. As a social construct and from an equity perspective, race is an important issue for GCIR in the broader immigrant rights field. Race is inextricably linked to contemporary immigration and shapes U.S. law, policies, and worldview, which ultimately affect newcomers and other marginalized groups.

Fulfilling GCIR’s role as a communications engine on the most up-to-date thoughts and concerns on all topics related to immigrants and refugees, these essays continue a critical dialogue for funders. The articles are insightful, provide pertinent facts and details, and tackle relevant issues that deserve exploration and thoughtful commentary.

In The Black and Brown Divide, Emmett D. Carson, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Minneapolis Foundation, discusses how the increased number of immigrants from Latin America fuels tensions between Mexican- and African-Americans as these two groups compete for jobs and finite resources. He examines the relationship between these two populations and demonstrates that they have much in common.

Carson maintains that Mexican- and African-Americans share a cultural heritage from African slaves, a history of discrimination as well as a struggle for integration, and socioeconomic profiles. In employment, African-Americans have nearly identical percentages for adults over the age of 16. While the median household income for African-Americans is slightly lower, both groups have similar rates of rental housing, and the same incidence of household poverty and health problems.

The author recommends a number of steps for foundations to take to ameliorate the friction. Funders need to:

- Help to eradicate the practice of treating people of color as competitors.
- Drop the use of the Latino/Hispanic category and strive to be more specific in data collection.
- Invite university scholars to study modern cross-cultural relationships.
- Unite Mexican- and African-Americans on global topics of interest to both groups.
- Support collaborations on issues common to Mexican- and African-American CBOs.
- Break the silence when evidence of conflict is observed in ethnic communities.

Continued on page 15