

CREATING AN EQUITABLE FUTURE
BY
HEALING THE WOUNDS OF RACISM

A Report on What We Can Learn from the 28 Years of Experience
of the
National Coalition Building Institute

Report prepared by Michael R. Wenger
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“What heart, if it knew better, wouldn’t do better.”

Dr. Gail C. Christopher, Vice President, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Foreword

This report seeks to 1) understand the approach to anti-racism activities that has sustained the National Coalition-Building Institute (NCBI) for its 28 years of existence and 2) examine what we can learn from its approach that may be valuable to other organizations engaged in anti-racism activities. The findings are the product of observations of NCBI activities, including its annual Associates meeting, and of interviews with individuals who have been driving forces behind its activities over the years. This is not intended to be a full-scale description of the work of NCBI, nor is it intended to be an assessment or evaluation of its work. These types of reports have been done in the past. The goal of this report is to learn what we can from NCBI’s experiences and the best practices that have evolved from these experiences and to share these lessons with other organizations that might benefit from them. Where appropriate and feasible, these lessons are told by NCBI leaders in their own words in order to capture their power and passion first-hand.

The author is grateful for the cooperation of Cherie Brown, founder and chief executive officer of NCBI, and Joyce Shabazz, Director of Affinity Group Development, who has been with NCBI for most of its existence and has been a major influence in shaping its approach to confronting and healing oppressions. I also wish to thank those people who spent an hour or more of their time talking with me individually about their experiences and insights--Donya Arroyo, Ira Baumgarten, Cherie Brown, Bob Dungey, Andi Geu, Ron Halbright, Deborah Terry Hayes, Diane Hill, Lori Ideta, Guillermo Lopez, Stephanie Low, Christina Rock, Mikeala Semexant, Joyce Shabazz, and Amie Thurber. Cherie and Joyce, in particular, spent extended periods of time sharing their insights. While the thoughts and words of all of these individuals are sprinkled liberally throughout the report, the individuals are identified only where I felt it would add strength to the report. In addition to these individuals, many other NCBI participants whom I’ve met have been generous with their time and their thoughts. Finally, I want to thank the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which has funded this report as part of its America Healing racial equity initiative, and especially Dr. Gail Christopher, Vice President-Program Strategy, her Deputy, Luz E. Benitez Delgado, and members of their Racial Equity Team for their help and support and for the inspiration they provide to all who do this work.

Michael R. Wenger

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Introduction

The Contradictions About Issues of Race

We live in an era of enormous contradictions with regard to issues of race and ethnicity. As an outcome of the courage and perseverance of civil rights activists, who in the 1950s and 1960s non-violently braved the fury of those who violently resisted change, laws that protect people's civil rights, though they may not always be fully and fairly enforced, now are well-embedded in the structure of our society. We have a President of the United States with African roots, an African American Attorney General, an Hispanic American Secretary of Labor, an Asian American Secretary of Energy, and two of the past three Secretaries of State have been African American. Non-white Americans are well, if not adequately, represented in the U.S. House of Representatives; several non-white Americans have served in the U.S. Senate during the past 50 years; most major American cities have had African American and/or Hispanic American mayors; at least seven states, including the former capital of the Confederacy, have had non-white governors; there are more than 11,000 African American elected officials at every level of government across the country; and approximately three million African Americans work in government at every level. In the private sector CEOs and high level officials of every race and ethnicity dot the landscape of major American corporations. Polling indicates that most white Americans believe in the principles of justice and fairness for all, irrespective of skin color or national origin. And until the recent economic distress, African American and Hispanic American families continued to enter middle-class status in growing numbers.

Yet, an egalitarian and racially unified society in which skin color and national origin in no way determine the barriers one must face in American life remains well beyond our reach. Major disparities remain in access to equal educational opportunities, living wages, fulfilling and rewarding employment, quality health care, and affordable housing. Environmental hazards are located disproportionately in neighborhoods of color, leading to disproportionate rates of asthma and other respiratory ailments; a plethora of research concludes that the disproportionate rates of cardio-vascular diseases in the African American community are, to a significant degree, a consequence of the stresses of racism; and life expectancy rates for African Americans remain substantially lower than for white Americans. The law enforcement community continues to primarily and often brutally target young men of color, particularly regarding the illegal use of drugs, resulting over the past 30 years in an explosion of incarceration rates of young men of color in the United States. Unemployment rates for African Americans, even in good economic times, have been twice the rate for white Americans. In the recent economic downturn home

foreclosure rates have been disproportionately high for families of color, and the wealth gap between white families on the one hand and African American and Hispanic American families on the other hand has doubled and now stands at a ratio of approximately 20-1! Hate crimes persist and have increased since the election of President Obama, and racial and ethnic tensions grip many communities, especially those communities that have seen an influx of Hispanic immigrants in recent years.

In addition, attitudes about race among white Americans of European heritage reflect a continuing significant level of fear and ignorance. Polling confirms that, despite the hopeful claims of some that we have reached a post-racial society and despite the positions of authority now occupied by many non-whites, negative racial stereotypes, which are a legacy of our history of racial oppression and which are perpetuated largely by fear and ignorance, remain strong and stand squarely in the way of progress toward equity and healing. The polling is confirmed with frightening frequency by the continuing use of race in political campaigns to divide people; by efforts to identify President Obama as something other than a loyal and patriotic American; by racially insulting comments out of the mouths of prominent celebrities like Michael Richards, Don Imus, and Dr. Laura Schlesinger; by obvious acts of racial violence such as the murders of James Byrd in Jasper, TX and James Craig Anderson in Jackson, MS; by blatant acts of racial injustice such as the horrifying aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the disproportionately severe punishment meted out to the Jena Six; and most recently, by the murder of 17-year-old Jayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida.

At the same time, those of European heritage and white skin color continue to enjoy the privileges of being the dominant group in society. They are viewed as individuals rather than as representatives of a group, and they are assumed to be the so-called default Americans rather than the other or, as one author put it, “strangers on our shores.” These privileges are so much the norm in society that they often are not even noticed by those who benefit from them. As the saying goes, “when the wind is at your back, you don’t notice the wind; but when the wind is in your face, you can’t escape noticing it.”

Without question, these disparities and divisions, the negative racial stereotypes that perpetuate them, and the overtly racist attitudes expressed by a decreasing but significant portion of the American community grievously harm those who are the targets. What too often is less well understood is that these disparities and divisions also do serious harm to dominant group

members, whether they are conscious perpetrators of racism, passive bystanders, or anti-racist activists. Persistent racial tensions severely weaken our society by weakening our economy, contributing to political instability, and diminishing our humanity and moral authority. The dramatic demographic changes occurring in the composition of our population—according to projections, our entire population will be majority non-white with the next three decades, our under-18 population will be majority non-white within the next decade, and at least half of babies born in this country today are non-white—will exacerbate these tensions and further weaken our society if we do not address them in a comprehensive manner and with a sense of urgency.

Anti-Racism Activities

Anti-racism activities are not new. From the earliest abolitionists to the many groups that have formed over the years seeking the elimination of bias and bigotry to the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement, there have been people in our nation who have sought to make real our founding principle that “all men are created equal.” They have worked through the courts, in schools, in the workplace, in our communities, and on our streets. Today, by some estimates, there are more than 1000 community-based organizations engaged in some form of anti-racist activity throughout the United States. In 1997 President Clinton’s Initiative on Race identified approximately 350 organizations engaged in such activities. More recently, a Request for Proposals issued by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation under the umbrella of its America Healing racial equity initiative yielded more than 900 proposals from community-based organizations.

These organizations approach change in different ways. Some focus on changing hearts and minds through activities such as inter-racial dialogues and awareness-raising activities that help people to both understand the legacy of our history and become more aware of how individuals, consciously or unconsciously, contribute to the racism still operating in today’s society. Others seek to build group cohesion and mutual respect through group activities such as community improvement projects. Still other organizations focus primarily on direct action to confront and change institutional policies and practices that perpetuate racially disparate outcomes. They may pursue legal remedies in the courts, organize economic boycotts against offending businesses, march in protest demonstrations, and the like. While these anti-racist organizations may employ different approaches, their primary goal is the same: a society in which we treasure the unique attributes of each person, regardless of skin color and country of origin, and in which skin color and country of origin are of no consequence in determining the success of a person’s journey toward his or her life goals.

The America Healing racial equity initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, launched in 2009, seeks to strengthen the work of these organizations and to widen and intensify their impact in combating structural racism and promoting racial healing. Through financial support, capacity-building, and encouraging the development of alliances, the initiative seeks to enable these organizations to share ideas, learn from each other's experiences, and support each other in confronting the inevitable challenges that arise in doing this work. Among the organizations involved in this initiative is the National Coalition-Building Institute (NCBI).

About NCBI

The National Coalition-Building Institute (NCBI) was formed in 1984 as an effort to combat racism and all other forms of prejudice and discrimination. The brainchild of Cherie Brown, a college campus activist in the 1960s and 1970s, it has evolved from its initial goal of trying to heal tensions between African Americans and Jews on college campuses to a growing international organization with a network of activities on college campuses, in schools and local communities, and among non-traditional allies such as law enforcement officials and others. It now reaches individuals and organizations in places like Canada and Brazil and in countries on the European and African continents. Its philosophical foundation is the belief that enduring institutional change and the passion necessary to bring about such change require people to grow in their sense of self-identity and empowerment and to do their own ongoing healing work as they take action to confront society's oppressions. In the words of Ms. Brown, who remains the CEO of the organization, "...if you're working on racism, particularly as a white person...and you aren't rooted in your own identities and also where you've been mistreated, not as a white person but [perhaps] as a young person, as a Jew, or as a woman...you are not going to be as powerful or as effective...I don't think anybody would stay with this work at the level that people have...if it was not for the healing work..."

Ms. Brown's partner through virtually the entire life of NCBI has been Joyce Shabazz, a woman of African descent and a community mediation professional, who attended an early NCBI workshop program seeking to strengthen a community mediation certification training program. The unique perspectives they bring to this work and the way in which their relationship has developed over the years have been the driving forces in guiding the direction that NCBI's work has taken.

There are six operational assumptions underlying NCBI programs. To describe them, we turn to NCBI's own written explanations:

"Training teams of peer leaders is the most effective way to empower people to take leadership in reducing racism and other forms of discrimination.

"NCBI has found that administrators and staff often experience powerlessness in the face of inter-group tension. For many the issues are so overwhelming that it has been difficult to know how to begin. Often the greatest obstacle to taking action to address racism and other forms of discrimination is the sense that individual initiatives have a minimal effect in light of the enormity

of the problem. NCBI's strategy to overcome this key obstacle of powerlessness is to train a corps of leaders who reclaim power by leading concrete, replicable diversity training workshops in a variety of work settings. Through train the trainer programs that coach leaders to think of themselves as leaders of diversity, NCBI builds a team that becomes a catalyst to effect deeper institutional changes. Encouraging the development of peer leadership teams to conduct diversity training workshops is not only an effective organizational strategy, but it is also an effective teaching method for training leaders. When participants come to a training program with the assumption that they are preparing to lead diversity training workshops, their learning is both rapid and profound. The planning and conducting of the workshops reinforce the learning. The effective leading of diversity training workshops requires each peer leader to be open to examining and working through his/her own prejudices. It has often been observed that one learns best by teaching. The peer group leadership of diversity training workshops operates on a similar principle: one learns best by leading.

“Programs to welcome diversity require an ongoing institutional effort.

“Too often the only system-wide efforts to address diversity issues are briefings concerning civil rights statutes. More needs to be done. Launching an in-house trained NCBI resource team to conduct ongoing diversity training programs within each organization allows both public and private organizations to respond more effectively to the issues of discrimination. First, the training team is a readily available resource that can be called upon at any time. Second, the training team can respond to the unique needs of a number of different constituencies, such as senior managers, part-time employees, displaced workers, line staff, and support service providers. Third, the NCBI training team, by including members of diverse backgrounds, is able to respond to concerns that involve particular groups as well as to concerns that involve the entire workforce (for example, between women and men; between labor and management). The most effective training teams include the participation of all leaders in an organization, school or campus, from the most senior person to the most recent recruit.

“The establishment of proactive training programs that build strong inter-group relations is more effective than programs that respond to specific incidents of racism or crises.

“There is a tendency to launch diversity training programs following a painful series of racial incidents. Although this response is understandable, and at times appropriate, one may be left with the false impression that the primary goal of diversity training work is to curtail overt acts of bigotry. An effective diversity training program, however, must be much more than crisis

intervention. The workplace, school, or campus offers a powerful opportunity for human beings from diverse backgrounds to learn how to live together. Public institutions, colleges, and private corporations can become models for challenging an increasingly polarized society by developing deliberate, systemic plans of action that foster healthy inter-group relations among all segments of the workforce. A related tendency has been to view diversity training programs primarily as tools to manage a public relations problem. Many administrators have been reluctant to implement programs on welcoming diversity, since the very establishment of such programs may be perceived as the admission of a serious racial problem. The advantage of launching positive, proactive, in-house diversity training often has been overlooked. Rather than developing a response under pressure following a racial incident, it is far wiser to foster a climate that views the diversity among everyone as a valued asset. The NCBI peer-training model offers a constructive preventive alternative to crisis intervention.

“Programs that welcome diversity need to include all of the visible and invisible differences found in a workplace or community.

“Racism, particularly in regard to African-Americans, must always be a primary focus of any diversity training program. In addition, a major institutional effort to welcome diversity should be inclusive of the many visible and invisible differences among staff, including nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, physical challenges, age, and socio-economic class. For example, NCBI has learned to raise social class issues at all of its diversity and peer training programs. Many people have little understanding of the ways in which their class backgrounds have shaped their views of the world and their interactions with others. Since racism and classism are so closely related, whenever the issues of class are addressed NCBI has discovered that the dynamics of racism have been better understood. One of the more controversial issues in diversity training work is whether to address a range of discrimination issues or to focus solely on racism. The concern of many anti-racism activists is that the inclusion of other issues can be used as a convenient tactic to avoid the more difficult work on racism. NCBI has found that the effectiveness of anti-racism work is actually enhanced by including a discussion of other institutionalized forms of discrimination.

“Diversity training programs that are based on guilt, moralizing, or condemnation often rigidify prejudicial attitudes.

“Some people respond negatively — some even with hostility — to diversity training programs. It is important not to assume that the problem rests only with the participants. The resistance is

often a response to confrontational programs that tend to pressure administrators and workers into admitting that they are racists. A great challenge in doing anti-racism work is avoiding two extremes: if people are targeted and required to feel guilty, they can quickly become defensive and thereby lost to the work; if the programs are too comfortable, the hard issues of racism never get raised and the unconscious racism goes unchallenged. NCBI's diversity training workshop model strives for a proper balance by assisting participants to take risks and to raise tough issues without violating their own sense of integrity and self-worth.

“Anti-racism programs are most effectively conducted with a hopeful, upbeat tone.

“The effects of discrimination are serious, and therefore many mistakenly assume that effective anti-racism work requires a deadly serious approach. In fact, the most empowering NCBI programs, where participants left eager to fight against institutionalized racism, have always included celebration and laughter alongside more sober moments. When people come to a diversity training workshop only motivated by fear or painful emotion, they are less able to continue taking powerful leadership roles. Though the needs are great, NCBI discourages relying primarily on mandatory diversity training programs for staff.. Resistant participants can undermine the spirit of the work, whereas voluntary participation can help participants find their own motivation for doing the work.”

All of NCBI's work—its workshops and train the trainer programs, network of resource teams, focus on personal healing, constituency groups, leadership development activities—is consistent with these operational assumptions and is guided by three core principles:

- Prejudice and discrimination cannot be eliminated against one group while continuing to exist against other groups.
- Personal stories change attitudes and widen the circle of allies.
- Respect and appreciation for leaders and their efforts, even when disagreeing with them, are more likely to enable them to be a source of sound policies.

NCBI offers a range of workshops, including workshops on prejudice reduction, leadership development, train the trainer, and the like¹. NCBI workshop facilitators use a range of methodologies, many unique to NCBI, to help participants become more aware of how to a) heal from the impact of racism and other forms of oppression, b) recognize the pain that others endure, c) address issues of internalized oppressions, as well as structural racism, d) deal with

¹ A complete list of programs is available at the NCBI web site, www.ncbi.org.

controversial issues, e) speak up and act on their own behalf and on behalf of others, f) build alliances, and g) empower leaders to lead.

Over the years NCBI's structure has evolved in ways driven by the felt needs of many of those who have partnered with NCBI's approach. Thus, there are community chapters, both in the United States and overseas, constituency groups, campus and school programs, and the engagement of the law enforcement community. As the structure has evolved, NCBI has found ways to integrate the various parts into a coherent, stronger, and mutually interdependent whole in which each element helps to inform and support the work of other elements.

In its 28 years of work on social justice, NCBI leaders have launched community-based chapters in 40 cities and affiliate resource teams on 75 college and university campuses; NCBI chapters have operated in Canada, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Brazil, South Africa, Bosnia and Macedonia, as well as throughout the United States; NCBI training programs have been led in ten countries; and NCBI programs have been offered as a course selection in academic programs in the United States and Europe.

To date, over 50,000 young people and adults have attended an NCBI Train the Trainer program and learned the skills necessary to lead diversity and inclusion programs. In turn, these 50,000 trained leaders have led thousands of programs in schools, law enforcement offices, college and university campuses, and community-based organizations. It is estimated that at least two million people have attended at least one of these NCBI workshops and been impacted by the principles and practices of NCBI.

While there certainly have been ups and downs and challenges in its history, and like many other non-profits, it struggles to maintain itself financially, the enthusiasm and commitment of so many to NCBI's approach may be the strongest evidence of its value in healing racism and its impact, as well, on other forms of oppression.

A Model for Building Relationships

Our behavior often is driven by past hurts. The experiences, both good and bad, that occur in our lives as a result of racism and oppression can significantly influence how we treat others. Healing from the hurts inflicted by racism and oppression is an essential step toward achieving racial equity and racial healing in our society. The partnership between Cherie Brown and Joyce Shabazz points the way toward such healing, and how it has evolved reflects many of the best practices that are embodied in the work of NCBI. The evolution of their partnership is a story of overcoming challenges that are all too familiar in the racial history of our nation—dealing honestly and courageously with our own oppressions while learning to recognize and respect the oppressions that others have endured as a result of our racial history. It is a story of mutual persistence, trust, respect, and accountability.

Cherie Brown grew up in a Jewish family that rejected the pull of white flight when Black African heritage families began moving into their previously largely Jewish neighborhood. As a young child she recalls kitchen table conversations about the importance of the alliance between Blacks and Jews because of their common struggle against oppression and the importance of resisting efforts to pit one against the other. Growing up in this environment helps to explain her activism as a college student at UCLA, her subsequent work in seeking to promote racial justice, and the inspiration she felt to launch the National Coalition-Building Institute in 1984.

Not long after the launching of NCBI, Joyce Shabazz, a Black African heritage woman raised to be strong, proud, and self-reliant, came to an NCBI workshop looking for some answers. She was part of a team that developed and delivered a 32-hour certification program for community mediators in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As the demographics of the community changed and the number of immigrants of Haitian and Central American identity increased, she began thinking about ways to infuse into the mediation training some awareness around identity as a pre-requisite for addressing the systematic oppression that she observed. An NCBI poster advertising a workshop caught her eye, and she decided to attend.

During the workshop Joyce's participation in a demonstration of a process for addressing controversial issues caught Cherie's attention and motivated her to reach out to Joyce. Persistent and direct by nature and knowing that the organization needed multicultural leadership, she saw in Joyce a prospective partner and active NCBI leader.

Joyce was initially cautious. Cherie’s overtures seemed to reflect a stereotype with which she was all too familiar—that smart and capable black people were the exception rather than the rule. “I was kind of looking around wondering why everyone was so excited over a skill set that came naturally to me as a professional in the field.”

What Cherie saw was a potential partner. “I was deeply attracted to Joyce’s power and ...brilliance and her passionate commitment to this social justice work. I saw in her a powerful friend and ally.”

Joyce hesitated. “I didn’t know this woman from Eve, some people say Adam, and I’m standing here thinking what is going on ... So, in that moment when Cherie was saying she wanted to be my friend, I could hear my grandmother’s voice saying to me that a friend is a gift that you give yourself, that no one can decide that for you. So rather than stepping forward, I stepped back to examine myself, the organization, and Cherie to decide if this was a journey I wanted to take. I was very deliberate.”

Their initial reactions are very much a reflection of the different perspectives from which they come, and perhaps more importantly, they are a reflection of how a lack of meaningful communication and interaction among people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds can, even with the best intentions on the part of both parties, lead to misunderstandings and can inhibit the growth of relationships. Eventually, Joyce decided to take the challenge, and the two have become friends and loyal allies in leadership. Their relationship forms a model of how to bridge gaps created by the environment in which we grow up, and it animates the work of the organization. It is not always smooth. As with any strong relationship, there have been tensions. When these tensions arise, both parties in the relationship must be honest with themselves and with each other, and they must hold themselves and each other accountable for their behavior. One particular story illustrates how the Brown-Shabazz relationship—and indeed their friendship—has grown deeper and more meaningful because of their mutual honesty and their willingness to assert their identities, confront their hurts, and hold themselves and each other accountable.

In Cherie’s words:

“I was on vacation ... and our office manager had mentioned during a telephone check in call a consultant invoice (from Joyce) that in my mind seemed different than what I thought it should be. So, I said hold it until I return. Well I was going to be on vacation for another week so this meant that payment for Joyce was withheld, and that was understandably upsetting for her. There’s also a piece of privilege as the executive director to say well I’m not ready to think about this because I’m on vacation so let’s hold it. But I wasn’t thinking about her.

“When I got home Joyce raised the issue. This really had upset her, but she asked what had been going on for me. We take the time to talk out and work on what’s also going on for each of us, so I can grow there and she can also understand what’s going on for me. It’s one of the best practices of the organization—to keep working and understanding what the other person’s issues and oppressions are that could be fueling things. She clearly wants to hold me accountable for oppressive things I’ve done, and at the same time she wants to understand what my issues are as a Jewish woman who has been impacted by anti-Semitism.”

In Joyce’s words:

“... the way that racism manifested in that scenario is that I was not (seen as) trustworthy, which is inherently the way that racism can come at particularly dark-skinned Black African heritage people and particularly around money or anything that has value. There’s this whole historical stereotype of us being thieves, and so this pushed up against the racism of being used for my presence and intelligence to do the work but not trusted around the money.”

Joyce held Cherie accountable for acting out of dominance and white privilege. Her ability to give voice to the mistreatment and to hold Cherie accountable helped Cherie to become more aware of the racist behavior that many members of the dominant group unknowingly inflict on members of other groups. At the same time it helped Joyce to understand where Cherie was coming from, which helped her own healing journey. Such meaningful dialogue that arises from holding each other accountable has enabled Cherie to learn more about unintentional racist behavior and its impact and has helped Joyce to learn more about anti-Semitism, the oppressions that Jewish people have suffered, and how those oppressions have affected them. The story illustrates the importance of the unrelenting focus of NCBI’s work on personal healing and relationship-building as a clear path to justice and equity.

A second story in their journey to the mutually supportive friendship they enjoy today illustrates another core foundation of NCBI's work—the empowering aspect of people from common racial and/or ethnic backgrounds forming constituency or identity groups and claiming with pride and authority their own identities as members of such groups and their capacity to guide their own journey to healing.

Let them again tell their stories in their own words. We begin with Cherie:

“...I am Jewish and that strongly informs my leadership. That is also what I bring to the table in terms of both my strength and my struggles and the impact of my oppression on trying to help and be an ally. A key aspect of Jewish history is that we as a people were ghettoized and forced to only live amongst each other. An interesting part of my personal story is that I grew up in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, a very Jewish community where the rest of the world was sometimes seen as untrustworthy or frightening. I was born right after the Holocaust, my neighbors were mostly children of Holocaust survivors, and what I often find is that Jews, because of a history of anti-Semitism, don't always want to be with other Jews or to work against anti-Semitism. The Jews in NCBI weren't always eager to be with other Jews or to work against anti-Semitism.

“So when the Black caucus leaders would want to be with each other, not just during a caucus, but like at leaders' meetings, or at hang out time, I'd think—wait a minute, that's where I want to be. So, the combination of oppression from a history of anti-Semitism and Joyce trying to build a strong base of Black leaders would kick up feelings of being left out. As a Jew, I had to do a lot of work on the impact of anti-Semitism that leads Jews to not choose each other.

“I was feeling I'm the executive director (a title since changed to CEO), so I'll be on all of the listservs, and I vividly remember Joyce saying to me ‘Cherie you have to trust us here. We cannot have a Black African heritage listserv that the White Jewish director is on, not because you're a bad person but because it just is too much the history of racism that we are not able to have our own places and spaces.’ And when Joyce said to me ‘you have to trust us here,’ I kind of took a big gulp inside and said okay. So it's been that process I think of both working on the Jewish heritage issues and also having Joyce and other leaders understand that the history of anti-Semitism is one of Jews constantly being kicked out.

“The key thing of doing constituency work in organizations is that the more ability that there is for groups to have an independent strong base in the organization, the more they’re going to be a part of the whole and committed to the whole. But I had to do a lot of work. I still do. One other point—there is also a strong element of white privilege here. As a white person, I have been trained that if groups of black people are talking, meeting, being together, getting close, I can’t trust the outcome. There’s both my vulnerability from a history of anti-Semitism and white privilege that just fuels racism.”

We continue with Joyce:

“...what comes up when you start trying to create a Black caucus is opposition because it is too hard for people to notice that it’s going to have good outcomes. It feels threatening because it contradicts the whole history of post-segregation and the civil rights movement that would hold out our goal as integration. So, people start accusing you of contradicting inclusion. You are seen as the enemy and treated as such. The obstacles take on the form of deeply-seated behavior patterns of institutionalized racism. We were treated as if we didn’t have the mental resources to figure out what we need to think on our own behalf. Creating a constituency group within NCBI was an experience with the bitter dehumanization of racism. NCBI is a slice of life, as are all organizations. The challenges were the perception of what it meant for there to be a Black caucus, how a Black caucus should function, who should be a part of it, who gets to have the decision around who is leading it. All of those were learning moments for Cherie and me, as well.”

What is reflected in the relationship between Cherie and Joyce is that people must be aware of the key identities they bring to the relationship and their impact. From Joyce’s perspective, understanding one’s identity, as well as the concept of dominance and white privilege, is vitally important. “What has to be examined is the unearned entitlement and privilege that comes with white race identity, while looking at the culture and ethnicity outside of that entitlement that often can empower friendship and connection.”

And Cherie continues:

“There’s accountability and generosity and trying to reach for each other and remember each other’s humanity, and so much of the healing work helps us to remember each other’s humanity.”

These two powerful women, because of their willingness to be both honest and accountable, to understand each other’s oppression, to look within themselves at their own need to heal, to take risks to deepen their relationship, have set the tone and the course for NCBI. And it can be seen in every aspect of NCBI’s work. Thus, NCBI has much to teach us about risk-taking and accountability as we continue to pursue a racially just and equitable society.

NCBI's Overarching Themes

Healing our Hearts: Getting Beyond Our Hurts

At the core of what NCBI does is healing. It is an essential element of virtually every NCBI activity, and it serves a range of purposes. In NCBI's view, if we can heal the impact of oppression, we will know ourselves more deeply and we can build stronger relationships, think and lead more effectively, handle conflicts more gracefully, support and follow leadership with commitment, and work together more productively. To the extent that our hurts are not healed, they remain as barriers to our ability to work effectively to end racism and all forms of oppressions, and they hasten burnout among those who often are the hardest working and most passionate activists. Says Cherie Brown: "We cannot just do the work out in the world without also continuing to do our own healing work. If we don't address the personal hurts that underlie the bigotry, we'll never overcome the bigotry."

Much of the healing work that is done at NCBI workshops and training sessions is accomplished through people telling their own personal stories of discrimination. "Part of what I did early on in putting NCBI models together," says Cherie Brown, "was try to figure out a way to help people tell their stories in ways that would be accessible to lots of people." In NCBI workshops people are asked privately if they want to tell a personal story of discrimination in front of the group. And they are not asked to tell any more than they're ready to tell.

"We don't push them to share," notes Cherie. "People worry that it's not professional to shed a tear, so we've come up with systematic ways to make it really safe, and the biggest thing is that we do not take people any deeper than they're ready to go. The result is that often you have very profound stories being shared because it's completely a choice."

Sharing stories of oppression frequently leads to tears from grief. This emotional release can have a healing impact. This is an important part of the process of confronting racism. The healing work allows people to have access to their own skills in negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution that too often are buried under the unhealed emotion.

For those listening to the stories, it's a powerful way to generate allies. Again in Cherie's words, "we in NCBI say that you don't change people's minds, you change their hearts. And what changes hearts are hearing the stories. You can refute facts and figures, but you can't refute someone's story."

The emotional power of the stories often leads to an increased commitment on the part of the listeners to be strong allies in the fight against oppression. They remember the stories, and it strengthens their courage to propel themselves into greater activism. Moreover, because most of us have stories of oppression to tell, it helps the listeners to identify more closely with the storyteller.

Joyce brings a unique perspective to the healing process:

“As a Black Heritage woman of a particular culture and traditions, I was very familiar with healing and the need to address it. For me, I came into a relational connection with the need for healing based on my spirituality. We often notice, particularly in the Black African heritage caucus, that some of the information and insights that we learn about or hear about, at least from the NCBI perspective, resonate with what many of us have practiced. You must absolutely have access to your feelings and your emotions and be able to discharge and give voice to what is hurting inside of you. This is not a simple intellectual exercise around political correctness. We are dealing with human emotions that arise from our life experiences and that inform our behavior toward ourselves and toward others.”

The healing process has several impacts:

- It helps people release some of the pain and stress that get in the way of treating others with respect.
- It helps others in the group to know the person more deeply and to witness the impact of racism and oppression on that person’s life.
- It helps people make connections with each other. Often people in the group identify with the stories and make real connections with the storyteller.
- It helps everyone in the group to make an increased commitment to fight against the oppression of the group to which the storyteller belongs.
- It helps everyone in the group to grow and to see issues from a range of perspectives.

Says one NCBI participant:

“What separates NCBI from other things that I’ve seen is the understanding that unless people get a chance to do healing work, it’s hard for them to move forward. They get stuck in their hurts. Other programs deal with conflict by encouraging people to say how they feel, but I would notice that people were still not able to let go of the hurt. They could name it, but they couldn’t move beyond it. What’s profound about NCBI is that people are eager to tell their stories and are amazed at how free it makes them feel. But then on a deeper level there comes a time when you need to be able to get beyond the story and think more flexibly. Those of us who’ve been there for a long time, we do the work and we cry together, and we get upset with each other and work through really tough things, and in learning to do it with each other, we’re able to bring it to our families or work environment or to the training that we do with other organizations.”

Not everyone within NCBI is ready for the large-group storytelling. An example of how NCBI deals with this challenge is illustrated in the way it has responded to participants from the law enforcement community. With this group NCBI has chosen to have officers tell their stories in small groups. Each small group then chooses the story it wants to have shared with the larger group.

NCBI also adapts its methodology to reflect the needs of diverse cultures. The fact that the NCBI process allows people to approach the healing process from their own particular perspective strengthens the overall impact. As one participant said: “I’ve been through many kinds of diversity training, but NCBI’s healing component makes it different, and it makes it feel like there is something to work towards that is beyond just intellectually trying to figure things out.”

The healing work is integrated throughout NCBI. There aren’t some who lead the healing work and others who need the healing work. Everyone participates, sharing their stories and being listened to by the entire group. In Cherie Brown’s words, “it is deeply bonding and one of the strongest means for helping people to keep doing the work and not burn out. That there is time to heal and look at the difficulties.”

Perhaps most importantly, relationships get built because of what people go through in making themselves vulnerable to others in a safe setting. Says Joyce Shabazz, “the relationships this builds really can be unshakable. It can build life-long, truly authentic relationships.”

Healing Leads to Institutional Change

Healing the wounds of individuals can lead to institutional change. One NCBI participant noted that healing leads to action. “Healed people take on institutional change much more readily. Doing effective healing work is a prerequisite and an integral part of taking on institutional change. And the work of NCBI is both doing the healing work and taking on institutional change. One without the other is weak and ineffective.”

The healing work is important, yet not sufficient. Thus, NCBI has learned to train all of its leaders in specific leadership empowerment skills:

- How to shift the attitude of someone making an oppressive joke, comment or slur.
- How to listen to the heartfelt concerns underneath a heated controversial issue and reframe the issue in a way that builds bridges.

These skills empower NCBI leaders to move from healing into action, from a sense of powerlessness to a sense of empowerment. And this sense of empowerment leads to institutional change.

Constituency Groups: “Do You Want Your Privilege Or Your Humanity?”

Constituency group work was not originally a part of the NCBI agenda. It began with the African Heritage Caucus, because several African Americans involved in NCBI activities felt the need for their own space to share their experiences and to establish their place within the organization as a pre-requisite to building bridges across the identities to other groups. While they may have recognized the sincerity of white anti-racist leaders within the organization, they felt that their concerns were not being fully heard or addressed. Their goal was not a colorblind organization in which everyone assimilates into the norms established by people of white European heritage, but rather an organization in which racial and ethnic differences are respected and cherished for their unique attributes that can make the organization more dynamic and vibrant.

The path to constituency groups was not traversed, however, without challenges. White members of NCBI, acting out of a sense of dominance and privilege, were suspicious of the intentions of those who wanted to meet on their own. But this challenge demonstrated anew the strength of NCBI. Despite the initial struggle, it was able to partner with the vision and see the need for the constituency groups/identity caucuses. Rather than creating divisions within the organization, the caucuses have made NCBI immeasurably stronger, because people can feel secure in the knowledge that there is a safe space in which they can share their experiences and feel assured that the larger organization will welcome their leadership and hear them with respect and with an eye toward authentic inclusion. Today, in addition to the African heritage group, there are constituency caucuses for women, for men, for people of Jewish heritage, for people of Latino heritage, for people of Asian heritage, and for people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender. In August, 2011, a White European Heritage Caucus was created. It focuses on the concepts of dominance and privilege.

These caucuses serve several important purposes. Internally, they allow people safe and unfiltered space in which to:

- a) discuss their own identity and examine the impact of specific oppressions in their lives,
- b) share common traditions and customs,
- c) confront misinformation about themselves and others,
- d) develop their strengths and leadership skills,
- e) address issues of power and self-worth, and
- f) feel grounded and more profoundly connected to others of like heritage.

Externally, it helps to:

- a) make others sensitive to the issues of each group,
- b) minimize oppressive behaviors that occur daily,
- c) provide a “go-to” group to understand their unique perspective when issues arise related to the particular heritage,
- d) reduce myths and stereotypes that plague various identity groups,
- e) make others aware of and appreciate the nuances that characterize these groups,
- f) facilitate outreach to other members of the group,
- g) enable specialized intervention in crisis situations, and
- h) facilitate principled stands with a spirit of generosity.

The constituency groups meet on a regular basis, often by telephone, and the leaders of the constituency groups meet by telephone monthly. Constituency groups convene retreats, usually annually, at which they engage in activities designed to bring them closer together, as well as to work on issues like reclaiming voice, asserting authentic human value while releasing patterns of assimilation, and noticing how their primary oppression distorts or interrupts their inherent human qualities.

One participant explained the importance of the constituency groups:

“I wasn’t quite sure what to expect at our first constituency group meeting. But I remember that first night when there was an opening question along the lines of ‘if you could be sure that this was a completely safe space, what would you say.’ And I was astounded that as I started to listen to how everyone else was answering the question, I noticed how my shoulders relaxed and I could breathe more easily. It was this feeling in my body that I had not even known I had been holding my breath. There are just ways that you walk through the world so cautiously, and you think it’s just my struggle. The more people were echoing the same thoughts that I’ve had, the more I started to understand the true impact of prejudice.”

With that sense of support, members of constituency groups can then more easily and more genuinely share their issues with the larger group, knowing they will be heard with empathy and understanding and with a sense that they are sharing their stories with people who want to be

allies. One NCBI leader believes that the work of NCBI actually should begin with the constituency groups:

“I think the constituency work is the life line. It is the critical core of NCBI. It is so critical that I think we need to invert our structure and bring folks into NCBI through the constituency work rather than through workshops or train the trainer’s sessions. In other words they need to come to a constituency training session as a pre-requisite for joining the larger organization. It forces you to look inward rather than to point fingers at other groups. If you don’t start there and have a clear grounding and sense of self and what you bring to the world and what your pain and ouches are, you become less effective in trying to then build bridges with other groups.”

And Joyce Shabazz, who leads the African heritage constituency group and coordinates all of the constituency groups, has an additional perspective on their value:

“There’s something about constituency work that gives you a clear picture of what groups do well in your organization and where groups are struggling in some way within your organization as a whole. It actually gives you evaluative feedback on how successful your organization is in developing relationships with particular identity groups.”

Leadership Development: We Are All Leaders

From its very inception, the vision and mission of NCBI was about the training and development of leaders from all group identities who had the skills to lead prejudice reduction, coalition building, inter-group conflict resolution, and bridge building activities. In its early years it sought to build replicable models that could, with a few days of training and a substantial amount of on-going support, empower people from college students to law enforcement officials to be leaders. According to Cherie Brown, “we wanted people who do anti-racism and anti-oppression work first and foremost to see themselves as leaders. We didn’t believe in the notion that some people lead and other people follow. By developing hands-on models that people could, with a relatively short period of training, replicate was a key fundamental component of our vision.”

The second key element of the leadership development effort was developing a support system for leaders. Leaders, whether they lead an NCBI community chapter, an NCBI campus affiliate team, an NCBI school team, or an NCBI project such as the law enforcement project, receive regular support phone calls. In these phone calls there is time set aside for healing, time to look at individual struggles people are having and about which they need to talk, and time to share the grief or concerns attached to these struggles. There also is an opportunity to talk about strategy and next steps in leading the work and to practice leading the model. These regular phone calls can have an empowering impact on leaders, who often may feel isolated and alone. In addition, for decades NCBI has held twice a year leadership associate meetings where NCBI-trained leaders from all over the world come together for three days of individual and group healing work, practice in leading NCBI models, and peer-led advanced professional development classes. At these associate meetings NCBI leaders also continue to advance their own understanding of racism and other oppression issues with a commitment to becoming stronger allies to all groups. Holding these twice yearly associates meetings for all NCBI chapter directors, affiliate directors, and senior NCBI leaders for the past 25 years has been a core best practice. Even in economic hard times, with very limited resources to bring NCBI leaders together, holding these meetings has been critical. They have enabled NCBI leaders, even in the face of great work challenges or personal discouragement, to still come together, sustain one another, learn from one another, and return home renewed and ready to continue the work.

The perspective of Joyce Shabazz has deepened the leadership development work: “For many years as a leader and educator and mediator, I had worked in school systems where we

practiced the belief that even some of the youngest children in the school system could take on the leadership of conflict resolutions. So, it was sort of a natural match for me that NCBI was focusing on leadership development. Furthermore, this work has clarified the operational definition of leader. As we know, historically leadership has been defined as very male and often very white. The leadership development activities of NCBI contradicts the rigid definitions that exist around who gets to lead. So, we expand our vision and definition of leadership and who gets to lead, and we create a more inclusive and multi-cultural organization.”

A unique aspect of NCBI’s leadership development activities is its recognition of the concept of leadership oppression. “Leaders deserve to be treated well,” asserts Cherie Brown, “and one of the questions we often ask in our theory presentations is how many people who are leaders or who have been leaders have ever been attacked or not appreciated as much as you deserve to be. And then I’ll often add to the question by asking how many people wanted to not get up and not continue leading the next morning. It’s not an institutionalized oppression like racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, gay oppression, but it is a key form of mistreatment that we need to talk about—how leaders get mistreated, often pedestaled and then attacked.”

NCBI teaches that people, including leaders, deserve to be treated well, and they teach a whole set of practices to encourage people not to lead alone or in isolation. One practice in the training of trainers is to always have other people there for support. Sometimes, they are there literally just to be a juicy face and beam at the leader or to check to see if the leader needs anything. People in NCBI community chapters and on NCBI campus and school teams are encouraged to give feedback to the leader by saying what they think the leader does well, how they’d like to see them improve, and how they’re going to help them improve. At the end of every NCBI program people are asked to give a highlight of the program and to share one thing they appreciated about the person who was leading it. Thus, the person who’s leading gets appreciated, and participants are made aware that they have a responsibility to support each leader.

People are taught that if they are having difficulty with a leader, they might first check in with that leader’s constituency group leader for support. That way, the constituency leader can help to interrupt any ways in which the difficulty with that leader may be based on oppressive attitudes toward the leader based on his or her identity. All NCBI leaders also are armed with skills that enable them to successfully handle attacks to their leadership. They are taught to

handle such challenges in a way that is respectful to participants, respectful to themselves, and that does not contradict NCBI's principles of inclusion.

The NCBI focus on leadership oppression and on the destructiveness of targeting leaders based solely on their role as leaders also helps people to understand more broadly how people get targeted based on their identity. Joyce Shabazz adds that it also helps people to understand how leaders from particular identity groups often get targeted as an element of racism and how a focus on leadership oppression helps to create inclusion.

“If we could have that conversation in our society today, we would stop pretending that Barack Obama is arrogant, and we would name the fact that he is being targeted by racism. We would also learn that people of Jewish heritage often get targeted around issues of money because that is how anti-Semitism functions. We would learn how women get set up in leadership positions, especially Black women. For example, I get appreciated for being a strong Black woman. But, God forbid I show up one day and don't feel particularly strong. I don't get appreciated for being intelligent. So, our focus on leadership oppression in a broad sense helps to create a comprehensive perspective within the organization that we should be careful not to perpetuate these kinds of leadership attacks or leadership oppression.”

NCBI's leadership development effort also intentionally seeks out people who have never been in leadership positions, encourages them to lead and to see themselves as leaders, and supports them as they grow into leaders. It gives them a replicable model in a safe place where they can practice leading, will get cheered on and supported, and can work in partnership with others. “I've watched young people in NCBI leading the work,” says Cherie Brown. “They'll have 4 or 5 of them together leading NCBI workshops, and they get to support and cheer each other on. They're part of a team.”

However, they are strategic in the people they seek out. Over the years they have established basic criteria for identifying potential leaders. For example, leaders must have the time to devote to the responsibilities of leadership. Whether they are part of an NCBI campus program or are a university employee, leading an NCBI team must be an integral part of their job responsibilities and not just an add-on. A second criterion is that the work should excite them, and they should be eager and enthusiastic about undertaking leadership responsibilities. A third criterion is whether they are part of an NCBI constituency group and whether the constituency

group leader endorses them. This is particularly important in trying to be sure that members of underrepresented groups are encouraged to be leaders. Says Joyce Shabazz, “If you want to lead in this organization, you have to be connected to the constituency group that supports your primary identity.” A related and fourth criterion is whether they participate regularly in the NCBI affiliate team meetings.

These three over-arching themes—personal healing, constituency or identity groups, and leadership development—infuse the various programmatic aspects of NCBI’s work.

NCBI's Core Programs

Campus and School Programs

Among the most active of NCBI's programs are in schools and on college campuses. It is where young people can learn, as one student put it, "to put your 'ouch' aside," and learn to deal with people as individuals. And, according to Ira Baumgarten, who has been a key leader for school programming, young people are anxious to talk once they feel they are in a safe and healing environment.

In one school training session, an NCBI trainer related that they "tried to train about 180 people all at the same time, which was quite an experience. We didn't get through the whole workshop. We just got up to caucuses, a component of the NCBI One-Day Training Model, because there were so many people who wanted to talk. But even that experience was very healing for people. People got to talk about race and about prejudice and about gender differences in a way that they had never been able to talk before. They got to say what was on their mind to the whole school community, and it really opened up dialogue in a way that had never been before."

In another school system there are programs in elementary, middle and high school levels involving over 700 students on an annual basis. There is a summer train the trainer session every year in which high school students learn how to be trainers and then go back into the schools to work with adults to train other young people. The results are compelling. In the school district in question, where they have trained the entire freshman high school class for the past three years, they've seen more than a 50% decrease in violence in two of the high schools. In another school system they've helped to build mutually beneficial relationships between students and law enforcement officials.

NCBI school programs are age appropriate, says Amie Thurber, NCBI leader from Montana. Thus, one school district runs a middle school after school program called Respect Club, where the students work with counselors to identify young people who are targets of mistreatment and those who are perpetrators. They also identify and recruit young people who have demonstrated the ability to be allies to others. In the after school club they talk about experiences of difference and violence and learn skills to interrupt oppression. In addition, they participate in a community action project each year, which makes a significant contribution to the community, widens the circle of allies for NCBI, and is meaningful for youngsters who feel that

they are part of something important in the community in which they live. Among their projects have been a published book one year, a video produced in another year, and a citywide diversity day event. Similar age-appropriate activities are being initiated for elementary school children.

One high school student summed up her NCBI experience in these words:

“I went to my first workshop when I was a sophomore. I met people from different ethnic backgrounds and heritages, and everybody related on a personal level. There was no adultism or other kind of discrimination because of our ages. We related as equals with adults, and it was a very different experience. I got to learn people’s stories and that everyone has problems, whether they are of a higher class or a lower class. I got to learn where they came from, and the healing work was amazing. I was with a group of people who I didn’t know at all, and they shared some really personal stories about themselves and the prejudices they faced, and I think it really helped because now I can work a situation out when it gets to a difficult place. I’ve used their lessons in my everyday life, and it’s been pretty helpful for me.”

Often, students who have been involved in NCBI activities in high school go on to initiate NCBI activities on their college campuses. The college campus program has a specific defined structure. This structure ensures that when a key official changes jobs or leaves the campus, the program can continue.

The campus program now has an acknowledged leader, Robert Dungey, who coordinates the program on a national and international level. When a campus expresses an interest in having NCBI programming, the first step is a telephone conversation between Robert and top campus administrators. This is followed by providing the administrators with a DVD and other NCBI material. There then may be an assessment of what resources exist on campus and what issues confront the campus. At times, campus administrators decide to visit another campus where an NCBI program is up and running. If the senior people are still interested, then NCBI does a one-day presentation for them, followed by an exposure workshop in which key stakeholders get a realistic taste of the NCBI methodology. In the presentation and in the exposure workshop, the leader of NCBI’s campus program speaks about the ways in which NCBI programming can translate into systemic change, such as enhancements to the curriculum, strengthening of professional development, and fostering more inter-departmental cooperation based on NCBI programming. Ultimately, there must be an NCBI affiliate team committed to and responsible for

the program as an integral part of their duties rather than as an add-on, and there must be a budget that is adequate to support the program. If there is agreement that NCBI programming would be beneficial to the campus and if these requirements are in place, then the program moves forward with the recruitment of students to participate in a train the trainer session and the scheduling of actual workshops and activities for students. Once a program is up and running, there are regular support calls to the leaders of the campus program, an annual conference at which all NCBI trained leaders come together to share ideas with leaders on other campuses, and annual or bi-annual train the trainers sessions to ensure continuity in the program. There usually are three ongoing campus activities. First, the trainers offer workshops. Second, the trainers are able to use their skills on an ongoing basis to bring about change on campus. Third, the NCBI campus team is able to respond to racial incidents that impact the campus by developing campus-wide programs.

These ongoing NCBI activities together create campus programs that endure, that transcend the comings and goings of school administrators, and that can serve as a model for other campuses. A prime example of how NCBI works on campus occurred a few years ago when one campus experienced an epidemic of nooses being drawn on white boards and on students' doors and hung in bathrooms in student housing. The institution took appropriate legal action to address the issue, as it should have. But legal action alone could not bring healing to the campus. The NCBI team was called in, and the director of the team met with a number of campus people to find out exactly what was needed. Once they had identified the key concerns, NCBI leaders organized a workshop tailored to the specific needs. They were able to bring faculty and students together to engage in dialogue about their feelings and reactions and to foster the beginning of a healing process on campus.

On another campus, the 2008 Presidential campaign led to a series of racial epithets written on doors in student housing. The NCBI team held a forum for all of the residents to talk about the impact of the epithets on them. This led to a dialogue where people shared feelings, heard the feelings of others, and came to some closure on the incidents. In other instances, such as when a controversial speaker is coming to campus, the NCBI campus team has set up listening tables where two or three members of the NCBI campus team man positions spread out on campus to talk with those who want to share their thoughts. This gives campus leaders a sense of what the impact has been on the students themselves and gives students a way of releasing their

pent up feelings. This process also has been used on campuses where fraternities have held theme parties around negative racial stereotypes.

On one campus all of the student athletes who arrive on campus must go through an NCBI training program. In one case the football players learned that their coach was going to be terminated, and a group of them decided to protest in a manner that, in all likelihood, would have caused them considerable difficulty without achieving their goal. One of the athletes remembered that they were supposed to call the NCBI team when there was a conflict that they needed to resolve. The athlete called, and the NCBI team met with the students and coached them through some effective conflict resolution skills, which were then employed in a constructive way to express the discontent of the players. Here is how the Dean of Students describes the broader implications of the training:

“We are an NCAA division one school, so athletics are huge here. Students are recruited from all across the United States and even internationally, and they come here with absolutely no knowledge of what it means to play on a team with young men from every conceivable racial and ethnic background. Football players get their own NCBI training, because their recruitment class is huge. You have all these men in the room, and you know, they’re 17 and 18 years old, and they’re sitting there together. For many of them this is the first time in their lives they’ve been in such a diverse environment. We had a guy from a small town who said his entire town and the three surrounding towns are all completely white, he’s never even met a non-white person until today, and now he’s sitting in a room where he’s a minority and he doesn’t know what to do with that. Or we have international students who come and play football for us, and they’re talking about their cultures and how they are discriminated against or mistreated.

“The conversations that just sort of emerge throughout the day are beautiful. We’re hearing from coaches and athletes that before we went in, when they didn’t address issues of race and cultural background, history, sense of place, that it would translate into tension on the field and off the field and that they weren’t going to be able to ask any of the athletes to put their health or safety in jeopardy for one of their team members if they weren’t getting along off the field. So, they made this huge revelation that they needed to actually have conversations with each other, so that they could get to know one another better. It’s not always been easy as you can imagine, but it’s really been effective.”

In another example, medical students at a university known for its focus on issues of diversity in health care receive NCBI training on diversity and conflict resolution issues. They are then better able to serve patients with whose culture they may not be familiar.

One particularly effective practice has been the formation of a consortium of seven universities in North and South Carolina that have NCBI programs. They share resources, exchange ideas, hold annual conferences, and have joint train the trainer sessions.

The school and campus programs are particularly important for several reasons. First, students' views tend to be less hardened than adults' views, and students tend to be more vulnerable and more open to learning, which strengthens the healing work. Second, working on issues such as bullying helps to build relationships across racial lines based on common experiences and helps to create more secure and self-confident young people. Third, the school and campus programs can lead to inter-generational dialogues and authentic relationship-building across generations.

The Law Enforcement Project: “We Ask Good People To Be Better.”

Among the unique and courageous NCBI programs is its work with law enforcement officials. Engaging in this kind of work with police officers is particularly challenging for several reasons. First, police officers can be more uncomfortable than many of us in showing emotion in front of people whom they don't know. Second, police officers are trained that showing too much emotion or being too vulnerable can suggest weakness, which can be extremely dangerous in their line of work. Third, police have developed their own culture as a means of self-protection and survival, and that makes some of NCBI's language and activities difficult to utilize in a law enforcement setting.

NCBI has found that there are a number of keys to working successfully with police officers:

First, the terminology used must be acceptable to them. For example, activities like role-playing become “practical exercises” to help them to deal constructively with particular situations they may confront in the line of duty. Such “practical exercises” take live issues that police officers confront and help them learn how to handle such incidents in the future in a more positive manner. Similarly, diversity training becomes “customer service,” in which police officers learn how to relate more effectively to community residents by seeing them as clients or customers.

Second, as one NCBI participant put it, “we take great pains to mask healing in such a way that they can welcome it, appreciate it, and actually participate in it in deep ways.” Thus, certain exercises are modified so that the officers are not put in situations that make them especially uncomfortable. For example, rather than asking them to tell their stories in front of a large group, NCBI workshop facilitators may ask the officers to tell their stories in small groups and then have one officer from each group selected to tell their story in front of the larger group.

Third, police officers often are asked to come to workshops in their uniforms when community residents are involved in order to demonstrate their humanity as police officers. Thus, community residents can see police officers acting like fellow human beings rather than like antagonistic authority figures.

Fourth, the primary leader of the NCBI Law Enforcement Program, Fabienne Brooks, is an African American woman and a former police chief. Her leadership has helped to establish “street credibility.” Working with Guillermo Lopez, Director of the Latino Constituency Caucus, former Chief Brooks has brought the community and law enforcement personnel into needed dialogue with each other.

Fifth, NCBI finds ways to engage police officers in a positive way rather than in an attacking way, to lift from them the burden of feeling that they are being blamed for society’s ills and labeled as the only agents of racism. Thus, they seek to help both the police and community residents to recognize that good police-community relations helps significantly to reduce the danger of crime because 1) residents often have information that police need to do their jobs well and 2) police have information that residents want in order to remain safe. As one NCBI leader put it:

“You have to be able to just back off and slow down and remember who we are and that we are good people trying to get better. I tell police officers ‘hold it, I don’t blame you for all the crap that’s happened, but what I’m hearing you say is that you really get pissed off when people don’t recognize what a good person you are. And I’m asking you from that place of you being a good person, where do you think you need to grow? If you don’t find any need to grow, well then consider this an exercise. But as a good person, if you find something that needs to change, then that’s what we want to work on.’”

A leader of the law enforcement project who happens to be of Latino heritage commented about the importance of this work:

“I was thinking about the effects that law enforcement has had on my family and my community. I remember my father being billy clubbed by a police officer because he was standing on a corner. He did nothing wrong, but they hit him because he stood too long on a corner. So, I thought ok, in my mind police officers can have a major impact on our young people, and this would be a great opportunity to remind the police that tone is important, and if you don’t use the right tone, you can set anybody off. So, it just made sense that the best way to help my community was to support the development of a program that addressed this with the police.”

One of the key models that NCBI adopted was the Customer Service and Diversity Model, developed by the New York State Organizational Affiliate. This helped to convince police that steps and tools in customer service philosophy might help them. If they used better listening skills and checked their tone, things that NCBI teaches, they could be more successful. So, instead of framing activities in a manner that may be unfamiliar for officers, NCBI frames its work with law enforcement officials in a customer service manner. NCBI leaders also are careful to remind law enforcement participants that they are not being asked to ignore their officer safety training.

When they are engaged in a training with law enforcement officials, NCBI leaders spend time meeting with the members of the police department to get to know the issues they feel are important. They also meet with people in the community to hear their concerns. Says one NCBI leader:

“In some ways it’s simple, and the simplicity piece of it is that in life people who trust you share more with you. So, if there is a need for the community to share information with police officers, the police officers have to develop an ability to convince the community residents to trust them more. The way they were doing it wasn’t helpful or useful. They would tighten their ranks, and no matter what mistake they made, they would never apologize. It was our job to convince them in these settings that if they wanted the community to see them as the human beings they are and get past the badge, they had to do some things that included listening more, checking their tone, and sometimes putting their personal feelings aside. Once we convince the officers to try it, then the people in the community can come back and say ‘Wow, this is not what we expected from these officers.’”

In one community an NCBI community chapter, a college program, and a public school program have worked together to engage the local police department. Listen to the NCBI leader behind this effort describe the impact on police-community relations:

“I can see we’ve had an impact. For example, in 2001, there was an occurrence of arson at a lesbian couple’s home, and the response to that from the newspaper and the police department pissed off a lot of people in the community, largely because it was assumed that the department was turning its attention to the couple as having set the fire themselves. And though nobody was ever charged, it really, really raised a lot of hostility, and there was a big rupture between

members of the gay and lesbian community and their allies and the police department. There were people picketing the department and nasty letters to the editor. We were brought in to do an assessment and identify some next steps...provide a training for all the police officers and help facilitate some community-building activities between the department and the gay and lesbian community. We built relationships in that process so that members of the community got to know people in the department and realized that they're not the scary homophobes they thought they were. Then a few years later there was a series of attacks, anti-gay bullying violence stuff, and people were getting beat up downtown. Once again, there were rallies and protests. But this time the police came to the situation as concerned members of the community. And we had the patrol captain walking into a bar, and I watched this, one of the most outspoken gay activists kind of ran across the room to give him a hug. This to me was just this huge shift taking place. It takes relationship-building to create the conditions for people to get to know each other, and that's the difference I see that NCBI has been able to make.

“We've tried using elements from the training and tailoring it, adapting it for different settings. I've brought in community members and asked them some of the questions that we would ask in a caucus activity. What do you love most or are most proud of about your group? What's been most challenging? What might law enforcement not fully understand about your group? And I've just watched these officers' defenses melt when they hear these stories in a way that they wouldn't if people were in another setting. I think the model that NCBI uses just decreases people's defenses and allows them to see each other as humans.”

Looking Forward

Over the past 28 years, NCBI has assisted schools, communities, universities, and law enforcement with the skills and practices needed to build inclusive environments. With its methodology of integrating healing with activism, it has grown into one of the leading organizations in the social change movement. Its leaders are now looking ahead to the next decade with a clear and specific vision for bringing skills to leaders and activists who are committed to social change on a global scale.

“We are committed now more than ever to bringing our diversity/inclusion programs to the many activists currently engaged in social change movements,” according to CEO Cherie Brown. “We want our skills to be available to the many activists who are working hard for social justice.”

NCBI intends to continue its commitment to provide resource to school systems struggling with racial/discipline disparities. At the same time it seeks to position itself as a key technical advisor to organizations and communities, while realizing the vision of bringing the resource of constituency programming and its inherent benefit to these organizations and communities.

“Working in affinity to refresh perspective and integrate resource as leaders for change is an often overlooked component of inclusion programs. It is seen as counter intuitive or juxtaposed to the outcomes of inclusion,” says Joyce Shabazz, NCBI’s Director of Constituency Program Development. “Constituency work is the often uncharted path leading to the inherent humanity of those who have integrated value based on social identity continuums.”

The Passion to Act: “Don’t Be A Bystander.”

According to one anti-racist activist, “dealing with issues of race is not rocket science; it’s harder than rocket science.” Issues of race come laden with a jumble of emotions—fear, frustration, guilt, and anger being among the most potent—that many people would rather avoid because they are too painful to confront. Therefore, too many people of good will remain on the sidelines in the struggle for racial equity and racial healing, ignorant of our history and its legacy, unaware of the racial disparities in opportunity that continue to plague us, and unwilling to bear the burdens that are an inevitable part of the racial struggle. They remain passive bystanders rather than active participants.

Through its processes of encouraging people to heal racism, oppression, and the impact of oppression, respecting the identities of individuals through its constituency caucuses, training participants as leaders, and building strong and enduring cross-racial and cross-ethnic resource teams, NCBI is having an impact on reducing oppression. Through its workshops and train the trainers programs, it asks people not to be bystanders. It does this largely in three venues—school systems, college campuses, and the law enforcement community—where the healing, identity acknowledgement, leadership development, and relationship-building can bring about significant changes in institutional policies and practices. NCBI’s approach not only seeks to change hearts and minds, its approach leads to enduring institutional changes that, in the long-term, can narrow racial divisions and disparities across a wide spectrum of the society.

There is an important lesson here for philanthropies. Because they are so laden with emotion, racial attitudes change slowly. Those who seek immediate gratification in this work are bound to be severely disappointed. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, with a long-term commitment to its America Healing racial equity/racial healing initiative, has recognized this reality. Other foundations should not be bystanders. They should follow the Kellogg Foundation’s lead by making similar long-term commitments and by recognizing that a true measure of the success of a community-based effort to bring change in racial attitudes may not be seen for several years. But NCBI has demonstrated in its 28 years of experience that most Americans are good people who want to “do better;” that if given time, enduring change does come; that racial equity and racial healing go hand in hand; and that when equity and healing are achieved, we are all strengthened—as individuals, as communities, and as a society.