

Valley advocacy group confronts own struggles

BY MIKE PATRICK REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN – 3/25/13

The 1980s were scary times for factory workers in the Naugatuck Valley. As plants closed one after another, many workers felt worried, angry, and powerless to do anything about it.

It was under these dire circumstances that the Naugatuck Valley Project was born. While it didn't exert power of its own, it helped workers wield it by getting them a seat at the decision-making table.

Nearly three decades later, the coalition of churches, unions and citizen groups still believes bringing everyone together is the best way to change things for the better.

However, it must do so with a lot less money, as the faltering economy has decimated its budget.

"I think it very much is a question of us doing quite a bit of remarkable work with fewer resources," said Ken Galdston, one of the founders of the NVP and lead organizer of the InterValley Project, an umbrella group of which the NVP is a member.

When the Naugatuck Valley's factories were closing or being bought by larger companies as liquidation fodder, individual workers and union representatives felt out of the loop. Decisions were being made that would permanently affect their lives, yet they couldn't get in to see the people making those decisions.

So, instead, a local pastor would make the call.

"The pastor of St. Thomas Episcopal Church would call the president of what was left of Seth Thomas and say, 'We have reason to believe the company is up for sale,'" Galdston said, adding the pastor would then ask for a meeting, and would bring along some workers and community members. "Because it was not the union calling, because the community was calling and the community is recognizing that they have a stake in this, it was easier to get this meeting."

Through these meetings with dozens of such companies, the NVP helped factory workers whose jobs were being lost earn concessions like severance packages, retraining and timetables. In one case, the NVP facilitated meetings that led to the employees actually purchasing the company where they worked.

It may come as little surprise that employment is still a big issue in the Naugatuck Valley.

"We periodically do what are called 'listening meetings,'" said longtime member Steven Schrag, adding these town hall-style meetings help the NVP determine what issues to pursue.

"One of the biggest issues they raise is jobs," he said. "We found that health care jobs were still a growing industry, but there was a gap between the jobs that were available and people who were trained for them."□□So, within the last year, he said, the group

brought lower-level hospital workers together with management from four area hospitals — Waterbury Hospital, Saint Mary's Hospital in Waterbury, Griffin Hospital in Derby and Charlotte Hungerford Hospital in Torrington.

Also brought to the table, NVP President Cynthia Vergauwen said, were parties like Naugatuck Valley Community College and the state Department of Labor.

"We got them all in the room and said, 'We know you all work with medical people and you collectively train people... how can we make this work?' she said.

In the end, she said, most of the hospitals agreed to training programs that would help employees gain the skills to climb the career ladder.

The NVP was also instrumental in improving interpretation services at the four Valley hospitals several years ago.

People who spoke little or no English often had to have family members — or even other patients — translate their health concerns. Through meetings organized by the NVP, the hospitals agreed to work on ways to provide better translation services.

"Obviously, that had a great impact," Vergauwen said. "They were able to have those interpretation services rather than have a 10-year-old tell the doctor about his mother's issues that were private, because he could speak English."

More than two decades ago, an NVP effort helped establish the Brookside Cooperatives, still the largest cooperative housing complex in the state. It used \$8.3 million in state Department of Housing money to build 102 two-, three- and four-bedroom units within six individual co-ops on Waterbury's Fulkerson Drive.

The NVP project was designed to foster and develop self-sufficiency within the low-and middle-income population.

Designed as affordable housing for people working toward being able to afford traditional homeownership, one of the requirements of living in the Brookside complex is that its residents make a monthly equity payment, which they receive back, with interest, when they move out. It is hoped that the equity money would then be used as a traditional home down payment.

The NVP continues to support Brookside, recently helping it obtain a nearly \$3 million grant to make the complex more energy efficient.

A review of its tax records indicates the NVP's assets shrank from about \$135,000 in 2001 to a deficit of almost \$1,500 in 2010. Galdston said much of the group's funding

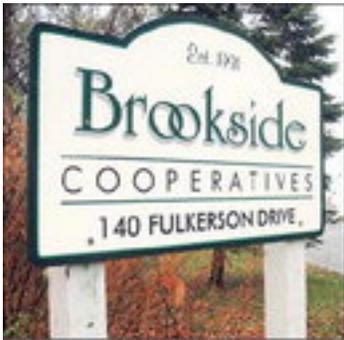
traditionally has come from its member organizations and larg-er national religious groups. Those groups have themselves seen a decrease in donations.

The group pays organizers and some office staff, and Galdston acknowledged it may be hard for people unfamiliar with NVP to find a physical manifestation of its more than \$150,000 in annual expenses.

□“It’s not money so we can buy food so we can distribute it,” he said. “It’s not about direct service. It’s not like our group’s saying ‘Tell us your problems, we’ll fight for you.’ It’s not about advocacy.”

What it’s about, he said, is relationships.

“One underlying product is you’re getting people from different backgrounds — racially, economically — building community at a time people are increasingly isolated, and you’re getting people involved in public life at a time there’s more cynicism,” he said. “You are getting concrete outcomes.”



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The Brookside Cooperatives will get almost \$3 million in energy-efficiency upgrades thanks to a grant it obtained with help from the Naugatuck Valley Project.