Introduction

Launched in 2013, *Bending the Arc: The Robert Howard Annual Symposium* is a yearly public program that celebrates movements for racial, social, and economic justice across generations. The symposium honors the work and legacy of Robert “Bob” Howard (1942-2013), a civil rights attorney and activist who fought on the front lines of countless political reform battles in Chicago over the last 45 years.

About Robert C. Howard

Since the late 1960s, Bob relentlessly fought to secure greater rights and end discrimination against women and minority communities in Chicago. He served as general counsel for the Afro-American Patrolmen’s League, successfully suing the city of Chicago over bias in hiring women and minorities on the Chicago Police Force. He played a key role in setting up the Office of Professional Standards, an internal mechanism to hold officers accountable for police misconduct. He was a driving force behind the effort to disband the Red Squad, an initiative in the Chicago Police Department which was set up to spy on community organizers who were seen by the Richard J. Daley administration as threatening the political order. He also served the Chicago Public Schools for almost twenty years, designing the school system’s desegregation plan and overseeing its implementation.
After his passing, family, friends, and colleagues of Bob came together to establish the symposium in his memory. In partnership with the Crossroads Fund, the founding committee hosted the first *Bending the Arc* symposium on September 7, 2013 at St. James Cathedral with Angela Davis as the keynote speaker. Under the theme “If You Want Peace, Fight for Justice,” the symposium began with a day-long gathering of youth activists and emerging leaders who engaged in dialogue with Ms. Davis about challenges in their work. In the evening, the program opened to the public and drew nearly 400 civic, political, and community leaders and scholars for a panel discussion featuring Ms. Davis and a diverse group of local activists. The discussion focused on gun violence, state violence, and practices in community resistance and resilience.

In 2014, *Bending the Arc* continued to address some of the most pertinent issues impacting organizing in the city. Time and time again, Crossroads Fund has heard from youth and adult allies on the need to have intergenerational conversations where everyone’s voices are heard and respected. The 2014 symposium provided a space for seasoned activists and emerging youth leaders to learn from one another by engaging in dialogue within the theme of “How do you Bend the Arc? Movement Politics: Then and Now.”

In the spirit of Bob Howard’s work around racial justice, gender justice, and civil rights, the Bending the Arc Committee convened movers and shakers from Chicago to build community with one another. Given the Crossroads Fund and committee members expansive network and access to many different community, civic, and political leaders and scholars, the event gathered a diverse group of individuals who came together out of a shared interest in working toward a stronger, more unified movement for justice.
The dialogue sought to address the generational and cultural divide that often hinders intergenerational movement building. Here is an example of the differences in perspective that often emerges between youth and elders:

“I don’t understand what you young people are doing. In my day we had ideology and organizations and we built movements. Where are your organizations and movements?” - Seasoned activist

“If things were so great back then, why are we in this deep mess now? The opportunities and mechanisms for organizing and change are different now. When are you going to catch up, instead of reminiscing or asking ‘why can’t you be like we were?’” - Youth activist

These questions, which were included in the event invitation, helped to frame the content of the dialogue. In order to ground these questions in a relevant contemporary context, the committee included two articles (see attached) with the invitation about the highly visible generational clash in Ferguson, MO during the Ferguson October month of action. The articles recounted how youth activists, calling for greater militancy, accused elders of being disconnected from the realities young, black people face; in response, elders harked
back to the peaceful tactics of activists half a century ago. During one large public gathering, the growing generational tensions led to youth physically turning their backs on leaders from the NAACP and religious institutions. The disagreement among leaders on how to protest police brutality, confront systemic racism, and galvanize the community connects back to the differing perspectives of elders and youth shaped by the eras in which they became politicized.

In order to begin bridging the generational gap locally and providing community members an outlet to share their philosophies and visions of social change, Crossroads Fund staff crafted a set of strategic questions to guide the intergenerational discussion.

The guiding questions were:

1) **What does winning look like to you?**
2) **What does it mean to be progressive? What is the hardest part about building power around progressive issues?**
3) **What are the obstacles to making change in your community?**
4) **If you had a magic wand and could change something instantly, what would you change first?**
5) **What are the levers of power that create change?**
6) **What are our shared ideas and values?**

The event brought together about 120 participants. Each person was assigned to a small discussion circle of about 10-12 people with a staff appointed facilitator and notetaker. Participants were assigned to particular circles to ensure diversity and balance between youth and elders. The circles did not include a round table to create an informal and inclusive feel. There were a total of 10 circles.
Prior to the intergenerational dialogue, Crossroads Fund invited grantee groups of the Youth Fund for Social Change and other community leaders to participate in a youth-only gathering. The gathering included community building activities and preparation for the larger group dialogue. There were roughly 35 youth present.

As an icebreaker, staff created a timeline activity borrowed from the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL) youth organizers training. The activity asked youth participants to “Name the Moment” when they first realized injustice in the world and took action; they wrote these moments onto a post-it and placed them onto a timeline. The timeline also included historical events such as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 9/11 so participants could visualize and understand how their lives and activism are part of broader, protracted struggle. The activity allowed the youth to situate themselves in the arc of history. Staff planned to do this activity with the elders who joined the space later in the day so they, too, could see who was in the room and the different backgrounds and perspectives sharing the space. But given the time constraints of the intergenerational dialogue, we were not able to present this activity to the elders.
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Given the context of this event as a community gathering intended to honor Robert Howard and celebrate social justice movement building in Chicago, all participants entered the space with some background in activism regardless of their profession. The event brought together a racially and culturally diverse group of leaders: lawyers, educators, artists, scholars, politicians, community organizers, philanthropists, and students.

There were participants between the ages of 14 to 70 working on a broad range of issues including immigration, education, labor, housing, the prison industrial complex, disability access, LGBT rights, international policy, environmental justice, and many more. This event provided an opportunity for people to connect across communities and struggles and to engage in collective visioning.

QUESTIONS DISCUSSED AT THE SYMPOSIUM

WHAT DOES WINNING LOOK LIKE TO YOU?

Although the expectation was not for participants to find consensus on a singular definition of “winning”, the question challenged individuals to reflect on the moments in their lives when they experienced a win and the short/long term goals motivating them to continue the fight. Most expressed that “winning” in the context of community organizing and advocacy occurs on a continuum. Many believe “winning” occurs in the process of participation, action, and individual/collective transformation. Some groups provided more concrete visions for “winning” which included: redistributive justice (redistribution of wealth), community control of policing systems, prison abolition, reinvestment in public education, popular education/education for liberation, government transparency, end of capitalism, and comprehensive overhauling of oppressive systems to create more democratic and localized alternatives. A few expressed satisfaction with policy changes or the election of new public officials, but largely people envision “winning” as a broader societal transformation in which the people hold the power and the systems in place cease to harm and oppress.

The term “winning” was further complicated by some who dismissed the framing of progress as “winning.” The concept of “winning” suggests the end of a battle or competition, and some refuse to buy into this notion since the work is not finished. One group raised the idea that “failure can be winning” to imply good can come out of an undesired outcome. Furthermore, the terms “community” and “greater good” commonly used by participants provide an ambiguous definition of who makes the decisions and who would be accountable to whom.
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PROGRESSIVE? HARDEST PART ABOUT BUILDING POWER AROUND PROGRESSIVE ISSUES?

This discussion on the meaning of “progressive” or possessing progressive politics challenged participants to reflect on their own values whether they identify as “progressive” or not. Many defined being “progressive” as taking a stand to challenge the status quo and pushing mainstream culture forward by working to create a more inclusive society. The work of the “progressive” means intentionally making space for marginalized communities, educating people to think critically through formal education (schools) and media, and empowering people to fight for equality. This question sparked contention among participants when one youth brought up the growing disillusionment among young people toward “progressive” politics (often associated with working within “the system” and existing institutions) and moving toward more “radical” politics (associated with working outside “the system” to create new/alternative systems that will replace the one that has failed so many people).

Some expressed that the term “progressive” and other political labels (“radical” or “leftist”) are relative and not always helpful or useful in understanding one’s beliefs and values. Along those lines, others said “let the work speak for itself” and not engage with terms constructed by politics and the fluctuating criteria that define them. Some elders were reluctant to challenge their ideas of being “progressive” given their long term connection to the term, while others were open to relative definitions of political identities. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges to building power around progressive issues is coming to consensus even within the “progressive community.”

WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO MAKING CHANGE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Participants did not discuss obstacles in great detail. Groups briefly touched on some of the roots causes of oppression and exploitation such as capitalism and hyper-individualism; most moved onto the next question to focus on the change they want to see and make.

IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND AND COULD CHANGE SOMETHING INSTANTLY, WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?

This question challenged participants to think about some of the most important issues to tackle or institutions to transform in order to pave the way for racial, social, and economic justice. Most groups listed what they would eliminate immediately. The elimination lists included: all systems of oppression, capitalism/neoliberalism/privatization, poverty, military industrial complex/occupation in other countries, exploitation of land and resources, two party political system, wars over religion, and incarceration. On the flip side, some groups framed the changes they
want to see in more positive terms calling for equality, economic justice, redistribution and balance of power, accountability, and working together across differences.

WHAT ARE THE LEVERS OF POWER THAT CREATE CHANGE?

All groups reported collective action and coalition building are essential to leveraging power. Some specific tactics include utilizing social media to raise awareness about an issue to a mainstream audience, voting progressive politicians into office and holding them accountable, and educating one another and building power at the grassroots level.

WHAT ARE OUR SHARED IDEAS AND VALUES?

Across all groups, participants expressed values around equality, inclusivity, accountability, and collectivism/community. In order to create healthy and sustainable systemic change, participants agreed that we need to care for, respect, and support one another regardless of differences.

Overall, people are interested in creating or participating in more spaces for intergenerational, cross-community dialogue. We’ve collected this information to guide future community groups, organizers, and activists to be more intentional about creating multi-generational dialogue.
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