

WE STARTED WITH TEA -

Comfort & The Need To Connect

Just like after 9/11 people are in shock and living in fear.

Progressives feel threatened and powerless.

We have no voice.

The need to connect is **STRONG**.

How can we build on that?

In Iowa in 2001, in the wake of 9/11, a brand new peace organization called Women For Peace was founded. It grew to over 200 women within one year. Women who had never been politically active became strong voices for peace, marching, vigiling, protesting and empowering one another.

How did that work? What lessons learned can inform our recruiting efforts?

It was a scary time, but really no scarier than right now.

*And people **NEEDED** to connect. Remember?*

People who questioned the government were attacked, threatened.

They felt unsafe to discuss their yearnings for peace instead of war with anyone.

*We all needed desperately to connect to others who felt as we did and **DE-BRIEF**.*

And there were just very few spaces where that could happen.

We succeeded by giving them a safe place to be heard. That was very powerful.

It could be again.

TACTIC: START SMALL. START SOCIAL.....

We started out by inviting friends and friends of friends --

NOT to a lecture or a hard-hitting film or even a book discussion.

We started with tea.

*Because even if you want to do something brave,
taking the first step can be scary.*

Making it less threatening helps.

STEP ONE: Finding Connectors To The Community

WHO HELPED?

I went to the Franciscan Spirituality Center and met with a nun who listened and agreed that it would be useful to offer some cover for those who did NOT stand with the President, those who wanted peace not war.

Out of that, 6 Christian women and 6 Muslim women came together to talk about our concerns and what could be done.

We decided to start SMALL. To plan a **women's SOLIDARI-TEA** where women who just wanted to show their support for peace and for Cedar Rapid's large Muslim community could meet, have some tea, share some pastries, and say what was in their hearts.

We invited women to wear head scarves if they wished. Several organizers spoke.

We read poems. Said prayers. Sang songs. A children's choir sang.

Each of the 12 organizers tapped their own communities and personal network of friends to come to the event and spread the word. We all worked on invitations, program, food and beverages, decorations, and adding speakers/art/music.

Many of the 200 or so women who came to the SOLIDARI-TEA got to stand and say how they were feeling about the threats in the community towards Muslims and the Mosque and the incessant drumbeat towards war and the recent bombing in Afghanistan. Most people just listened.

It was just tea. Nonthreatening. Social. We didn't push any agenda. We were creating a space where people could find their OWN agenda...

STEP TWO - PLANNING NEXT STEPS BETWEEN MEETINGS

We planned our next meeting before we planned the Tea.

At the end of the Tea, we distributed an invitation to participate in a **small group** we called **Women For Peace**, where we planned to talk more about **what could be done** to counter the hate and talk of war.

We held many such small groups over the course of a few months. And women came. We began adding our meetings to the community calendar in the local paper. More people came.

Women told us that these meetings were the only place they felt safe enough to talk about peace. They couldn't do it with their husbands, their families, or their church.

Personal contact was key.

Meeting with people or phoning them between meetings was absolutely necessary. They did not have us on their calendar yet.... So it meant personal reminders. **Email was not effective as phone calls.** Successful organizing takes time. No one reads their email... especially until they know you. Develop a CALLING TREE and have everyone in your group commit to touching base with everyone on the list of new prospects at least once a month, hopefully the week or 2 before each called meeting.

STEP THREE - LEARNING TO LISTEN MORE THAN TALK

The reason this worked was not because we talked, but because we listened.

And in offering women a safe space to talk about their fears they felt welcomed, they felt HEARD, they poured out their hearts. And we listened.

And a funny thing happened, they began feeling strong and empowered, and hopeful.

And then we asked, what can we do about all this mess?

WHY START A LISTENING & SOCIAL EVENT?

The Solidari-Tea we planned happened after 9/11. But the same kind of madness is happening right now, right here.

The issues now include gun violence, militarized police, losing healthcare coverage, immigration raids, and a huge transfer of wealth to the top 1%.

People are feeling unheard. Overwhelmed. Powerless.

Give them a safe space to be HEARD.

People NEED to connect, because they feel alone.

Signing online petitions or doing virtual organizing is not going to give them what they need.

They feel they HAVE to do something and don't know what else to do.

You run into these people all the time. You meet them in church, in parent groups, at work, in coffeeshops and libraries. **The time is right NOW to reach out.**

SOCIAL MEDIA didn't play much of a role in organizing in 2001. But it does now.

Your branch should have a designated person who ACTIVELY posts to Facebook and a team of members who agree to share widely her posts. This is how organizing happens in 2017. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Consider using an INTERN to advance this kind of messaging if no one in your branch knows how. They should post EVENTS, MEETING DATES, forward posts from WILPF US and keep WILPF's name visible as much as possible.

LESSONS LEARNED in organizing in Cedar Rapids IA.

LESSON 1 Don't set out alone. The more people who help, the more people will turn up.

We had 12 women who were committed to helping set up a one-time EVENT. Each of them helped spread the word.

Only about 4 of those 12 stayed with our group longterm. But the connections all 12 brought to that one starting event were critically important.

LESSON 2 Don't Just Go To The 'Usual Suspects'.

Even if you have a handful of loyal members or a local peace group, don't JUST depend on them. They may be already overcommitted, exhausted or tapped out.

It was probably a blessing in disguise that I didn't know anyone in Iowa, because I was forced to go to others for help.... People who DID know a LOT of people.

Maybe it makes sense in starting over to initially bypass the people you've known for years and reach out FIRST to groups of people you don't really know and who don't know you. It sounds counter-intuitive to initially bypass the people you've known for years and reach out to strangers, but it's not.

Building new bridges is something we fail to do when we feel comfortable or too busy and we just fall back on the 'regulars'. We have to begin to strategically include building new bridges into our work plans year after year.

LESSON 3 ASK FOR HELP from folks who are natural CONNECTORS, even if they are not WILPF members. You need to reach out to people who KNOW a lot of people.

I looked for allies among the Franciscans and found them. Those wonderful nuns offered the first invitations to gather and plan. THEIR connections got the attention of folks I never would have reached on my own.

LESSON 4 Don't lecture... plan something social. For WOMEN.

Serve food ... tea and pastries.

Or meet at a fancy coffeeshop where younger people tend to hang out.

LESSON 5 - Meet in a safe PUBLIC space.

If you meet now in an out of the way place no one can find, or someone's house, STOP IT.

New People need to feel safe in a neutral public area.

Find a library or community center.

A church or Mosque that will give you space to meet will work too.

Wherever you meet, ask them to help publicize your meetings in their newsletters or bulletins.

LESSON 6 -- Reach out to people who are not like you.

You don't know how badly someone is NEEDING this group.

Go to groups of people who LOOK different than you. People of color, poor people, differently abled people, older or younger people. Go to other churches, women's groups, union halls.

Stand outside factories or hospitals when shifts change and hand out small quarter sheets of paper with you next meeting time, date and location and the topic you need to discuss. Make sure it's scheduled when those folks are OFF work!

LESSON 7 – LISTEN MORE – TALK LESS.

At the planning meetings, set the stage and some ground rules... then retreat to Listen **A LOT**.

Look for who emerges naturally as a leader of the group.

Initially, mention WILPF, but don't push it. Folks are still finding their way.

LESSON 8 -- Plan your next meeting before your first one.

At your tea or social event, announce a plan for a followup meeting to talk about what can be done locally.

At that next meeting, give everyone a chance to talk and you LISTEN,

Ask them if they'd be willing to work together to plan some next steps.... something that connects their local issues to more global ones.

THEN start to gently talk about WILPF. Our history. Our internationalist perspective. Working with peacewomen across borders. How the global issues translate into local ones, and vice versa.