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thing on how do you choose tactics that on the one hand are very strategic and on the other hand are really provocative. It's who are you trying to piss off. What's the purpose of your action, what's the campaign it's a part of and how actually are you moving toward it. I'm not always sure that showing up at another rally, when there's five of them this week, is the way to use my limited time in a setting like Portland.

**J.Z.:** You're extending your work with the Open Society Institute.

**M.W.:** I started designing this many years ago and actually started in January 2010, and then I was diagnosed April 2010, so I'm on a very different trajectory.

What I had intended to do, and am very excited about, was working on Idaho, Nebraska, Washington and Colorado, four states with a strong rural profile, on what it would look like to update some of the basics of the model of the Rural Organizing Project, and what pieces would work there, and how they could find greater success in leveraging the voices of all of the state.

**J.Z.:** Creating a toolkit of sorts?

**M.W.:** Yeah. I was very sad to have to cut it short. But there was great response and interest. I think everyone recognizes that not only do they not know how to be effective at taking urban progressive politics and running it in a smaller town community, but also that if people feel unsure about the methodology, they also don't feel like they have any of the capacity — that actual cash in hand — to be that ever-present.

One of my conclusions is that the current model of running nonprofits is very staff heavy. And it's very, *we don't have the money to do that so we can't do it*, and it gets kind of predictable in what gets left on the cutting room floor when the cash isn't there. And I believe that we need a different model of organizing, which to some extent is how the ROP always functioned. It's always functioned saying we're going to be everywhere. We're going to be in all of those counties (and we have a staff of two). Our philosophy says in black and white that the more rural, and the lower density your population, the greater access you have to our resources.

**J.Z.:** Do you think the structure of nonprofits and the direction that they've gone, perhaps to survive in this economy, has damaged organizing efforts?

**M.W.:** I think in general, looking at what's happened to nonprofit culture since the 1960s, it has been damaging. I also think there are many great things that have and are even starting to happen more in systematizing basic capacity, and everyone having data bases that can be shared, organizations are getting smarter. But I think that the revolution will not be televised, the revolution will not be funded, is just core. And we've made that mistake that our organizations are actually how you change the world. Our organizations can be a part of changing the world, but when you look at the history of rebellion and uprising, good organizations will fast figure out how to support that, but they usually haven't created it.

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PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

**J.Z.:** Your father is a Dutch immigrant, and your grandfather was involved in the Dutch resistance during the Nazi occupation. How did that shape your philosophy of resistance and the extent of resistance, because I read that you said it didn't go far enough?

**M.W.:** In many many ways. As an adult, I've been really fascinated by this whole cell structure of how do you start a resistance movement. What it meant for my grandfather was to do weekly visits, so he had the knowledge that at this household, they'll take Jews at the drop of a hat. This household, never let them know what's going on. So when you talk about

mapping, it's really that concept of figuring out what is in our community so that in a worst case scenario we can walk around on eggshells and make sure everyone gets out alive, and in the best case scenario, already know that, *I don't need a conversation with you; you've got a lot of this figured out, but I've got to spend a lot of time over there*. So it's being strategic.

My grandfather was a great person, but he was a man of his times. And I think it's about being righteous without being really evolved. And I think that as a Left, we want people to really be evolved before we move forward. And the thing is, that's a process, and it's also about that celebration. Go have a lot of celebrations, but I just want to keep

everyone alive. And that's a different kind of organization. I'm proud of my grandfather, but not because of what we want to make him, but because he said, "No, we don't kill people here."

**J.Z.:** What do you consider the biggest threat to poor people's rights in Oregon right now?

**M.W.:** I think it's the cheapening of life. We did make progress in the war on poverty, the only failure was that confidence that you could put a timeline on it and say in 25 years we can remove these protections because we will have won that war. I think it's devastating how quickly we're rolling back to what's acceptable. That it's acceptable to walk down the street and see so many people who are clearly not making ends meet.

**J.Z.:** Is it acceptable or is it a resignation that it cannot be changed and this is the status quo?

**M.W.:** I'm not sure there's a huge difference — either way it seems like those numbers have no choice but to grow enormously given the values that we're putting forward in our budgets, and who gets tax breaks. ...

How many decades have we been talking about the same thing? It's like our whole society has been moved tremendously to the right. At the same time, with Obama and the disappointments and what it means to go from such an incredible unity of voting in this new president, and then recognizing how little that meant and more than that, how this incredible communicator was basically going to abdicate. We've eroded every little stop or firewall that had been put in place to limit the power of corporations and even two parties that actually had a

different message from time to time. All of that had been eroded by the time President Obama had gotten in there.

**J.Z.:** So the Right did a better job in organizing.

**M.W.:** I'll tell you what; if you look at who's bought Saul Alinsky's books in the last x number of years, 90 percent will have gone to the Right and 10 percent will have gone to the Left. You go on any of the blogs or book reviews, you'll see who's reading it. Or if you go to a Tea Party meeting. I bring more anecdote than data, but it's very sobering. I think it's too easy to come up with any one answer, but yes, I think they've done a better job.

**J.Z.:** What is the greatest motivator to getting people involved in a movement?

**M.W.:** I believe people need to speak to their anger and then they need a place for that anger to go. We create community and then we stop when we get a nice comfortable number. So we tend to create smaller clubs. The Right does not. That Tea Party meeting I recently went to had over 100 people. There was an incredible effort to greet people, make sure everyone signed up, and a whole lot of basics that come out of a Saul Alinsky's book. It was Friday night, they were having a blast, and there were great cookies...

I feel like if we're talking to ourselves we're not doing the work. Last meeting I went to before I became sick, you had the Tea Party folks being belligerent and crying. It was horrific. And then you had us, who wanted single-payer and sanity around immigration and health care, being slightly spirited and catcalling. So no one looked good. And my role was going round and trying to calm things. And everyone was being rude to me. So that's a breakdown of society. There's nothing good that can come from that level of polarization.

**J.Z.:** After 18-plus years of ROP, what do you count as your milestones?

**M.W.:** I would love to have a fairy tale and I don't. I feel like the struggles to make us be as effective leaders as possible are not much different than 20 years ago. I think humankind is humankind. What I feel like I am the most proud of is that we're still a low-to-the-ground organization. The successes have been about maintaining a community that is adding new people. We've lost very few, even though we've forced people to confront things that they never signed on for.

It's why rural matters. It's in the cultural wars. One of the very humbling things about these recent decades, is how they've kind of taken away the comfort of urban areas and feeling like they had the numbers and the power and all of the rest to kind of move things along without looking at the whole. And, God bless our democracy, every person does still matter. And it behooves our urban organizations that continue to get a little bit lazy to remember that if we can't really move this whole state forward, we're positioning us more and more toward civil unrest, which is really leading to civil war at some level.

**J.Z.:** We do get a little cocksure that we have Portland in our back pocket.

**M.W.:** Right. And the times that we live in with global climate change and everything else, why would we possibly think that this victory or this victory really matters? What matters is actually bringing more and more people to a place of critical thinking on a range of issues. That's the best security we'll ever get.

Learn more about the Rural Organizing Project at [www.rop.org](http://www.rop.org)