

Janet Byrd

BY ISRAEL BAYER
STAFF WRITER

Janet Byrd is a walking brain trust on housing issues and messaging. Working behind the scenes locally and with elected officials in Salem, she has helped push forward a housing agenda statewide that is supported by scores of organizations, and individuals.

Byrd is currently the executive director of Neighborhood Partnerships, which works to create opportunities for low-income people. Byrd cut her teeth in neighborhood organizing in Chicago, working on housing issues such as insurance redlining, neighborhood disinvestment and tenant rights.

At Neighborhood Partnerships, Janet has been central to the success of the statewide advocacy coalition, the Housing Alliance. During her tenure, Neighborhood Partnerships also helped launch the innovative multi-county collaborative to serve high-need homeless families, Bridges to Housing, and quadrupled the impact of the Oregon IDA Initiative, a unique statewide partnership that builds the assets of low income Oregonians.

Street Roots recently talked with Byrd about the work she does, and the political climate we find ourselves in.

Israel Bayer: *Can you talk about the messaging and framing work you are involved with and what you've found out over the past few years?*

Janet Byrd: Neighborhood Partnerships has had the privilege of working with some wonderful experts in strategic communications this past year and a half, including Patrick Bresette of Demos and Larry Wallack of Portland State. We've been training and supporting a group of more than 60 leaders and advocates from a broad swath of issue concerns in our trainings, our Leadership Salons and our Advocates College.

We're just coming to the end of the Advocates College now, and what I hear back from participants is that they've been able to use some of the new knowledge and skill in their work in Salem, in their communities, and within their networks.

The most exciting thing we're doing is honing skills to create the terrain for new conversations. Rather than getting stuck in polarized positions, we are now better able to move toward policy change by carefully

Getting the policy ball moving forward begins with how we craft the message

choosing words and the order of the concerns raised.

We've probably all been in a situation where the conversation we set out to have isn't the conversation we end up having. We may be trying very earnestly to answer a question and realize mid-stream that we have no clear idea of what understanding lay behind the question, what viewpoint was shaping it.

That viewpoint is what the messaging folks call a frame. It comes from the recognition that humans aren't blank slates. We walk around with preconceived understandings of the world and new information is slotted into pre-existing "frames." All too often we don't stop to think about what those frames are in our listeners. The result is that we're talking, but we aren't really having a conversation.

Where before we might end up getting angry or polarized, we now know that it's possible to step back, spend some time analyzing and listening, and then re-engage in a different conversation. Sometimes the solution is to re-connect to the values that motivate our concern about the issue, because values shape thinking and create an emotional connection. Sometimes the solution is to offer a new way of thinking or naming something, so that you aren't triggering a negative response. And sometimes it's thinking about how you want to structure a conversation — the order of your points.

I.B.: *How has the Housing Alliance done?*

J.B.: This Legislative session has been a disaster for low-income Oregonians. We've seen devastating cuts in essential services and supports, and we know that the impacts of these choices will hit hardest and be hardest felt by those who are already hurting. Our communities are stronger when we all have access to stable, safe and decent housing, and we have stepped backwards this session.

Housing resources have been cut less than many other programs, proportionately, but there have still been cuts made in terms of the numbers of people who will remain stable in housing or be helped to find new housing. There will also be significantly less emergency rent assistance available this year, as federal stimulus funds dry up while the recession continues. Many people will also be hurt by cuts to other programs that provide support such as Temporary



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Assistance to Needy Families. We must all do everything we can to build up our voices, to work across specific issue concerns, and to help legislators understand the impacts of their decisions on the men, women, and children in their districts who need the opportunity that stable housing provides to be engaged members of the community.

I.B.: *The Right and the Tea Party are becoming more successful in driving specific agendas with poor and working people. Does this have something to do with progressives always wanting to talk about policy specifics, instead of delivering a message of values?*

J.B.: We're in a situation where working people are seeing their standard of living erode, their hopes that their kids will see a bright future are diminishing, and the information they get is confusing and overwhelming. People are afraid, and looking for things to hold on to. Freedom, liberty, the rule of law — those are powerful

concepts, and they're being used to move a conservative policy agenda.

Progressives do forget to talk about values. Those of us who are religious rarely talk about faith. We may assert a "right," but we usually forget to talk about the communal benefits of guaranteeing a just society.

We also get really caught in the weeds, because policy is complicated, or we get so concerned with the nuance of the policy argument that we don't reinforce one another in public. We have trouble articulating priorities, and we end up sounding conflicted, confusing, or bureaucratic. For folks who just want to downsize government, it's a lot easier to talk about deregulation than it is to talk about how the housing subsidy programs all intersect or interact. Reclaiming values helps us name what's important behind the policy changes we want.

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