

## Regular People Can Do Amazing Things

### The Denver Foundation Leads By Supporting Neighborhood Partnerships

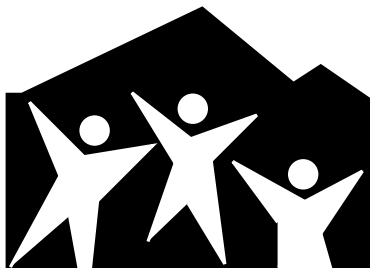
#### Christine Soto

I was apprehensive, but excited, when I was hired in 1997 to implement a neighborhood program at The Denver Foundation. “Inaccessible” and “elitist” were two words that were often used to describe Denver’s community foundation when I first became aware of it in the early 1980s. Though I came to realize that these descriptions weren’t totally accurate, this was the perception of much of Denver’s nonprofit community. Founded in 1925, in the mid 1990s it still had this reputation, a rather small endowment for a 70-plus year old organization, and a board of trustees comprised of “the upper crust.”

I came to The Denver Foundation with a 25-year background in direct service and management of nonprofit organizations, primarily with youth development agencies. I had done counseling, raised money, managed volunteers. However, I had never worked in traditional community development..I believe this was an advantage when I became the Program Officer in charge of creating and implementing what eventually became the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program of The Denver Foundation.

Today, this program has earned national acclaim for its grassroots, resident-centered approach to engaging people in improving the neighborhoods they live in. In 2005, it celebrated giving away its one millionth dollar in grants. These grants averaged \$3,000 and were made to groups comprised of three or more residents – groups that are not nonprofit organizations. Ask around today, and those in the know about the nonprofit and foundation sector will describe The Denver Foundation as the most connected-to-the-community foundation operating in metro Denver.

How did this once stodgy and exclusive foundation make this transition? And why do it in the first place?



Learn more about  
Strengthening Neighborhoods at  
[www.denverfoundation.org/](http://www.denverfoundation.org/)

For the Foundation, the “why” was to increase community awareness of the Foundation and to connect it to the community at the grassroots level, where it had no connection. As one wise man said, we were “putting community back into the community foundation.” It was also about doing something new – and it did, in fact, usher in a new era of openness, accessibility, innovation

and collaboration for The Denver Foundation. It was also unique: at the time no other foundation in Colorado was making grants to groups of neighbors to improve their neighborhoods.

For me, the “why” was about putting into action my belief that regular people, working together, can do amazing things. I was convinced that by giving people small amounts of money, along with lots of flexibility on how to use that money, they would make things happen in a way that organized philanthropy or formally structured nonprofits or government could not. Hence, one of our first principles: ***We shall trust in the people.***

My first assignment was to find out what was happening – or not – in neighborhoods of Denver, and what models already existed in the philanthropic world for working successfully at this level.

My explorations led to many places, but most significantly to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Asset Based Community Development Institute. In the early 80's, Mott had funded a group of community foundations around the country to begin neighborhood-focused grantmaking. Rainbow Research wrote a series of reports and evaluations about this effort ([www.rainbowresearch.org](http://www.rainbowresearch.org)). The group, while no longer getting direct funding from Mott, had continued to share experiences and lessons. Making small grants available to resident groups was one of the tools widely used.

The ABCD institute had begun to publish its experiences and reflections about how communities, regardless of their challenges, also had innumerable assets. And, if tapped into and supported, those assets could be the key to amazing and positive change.

What I learned from these two sources resonated with what I was learning from a variety of individuals and organizations. It reinforced my own belief that while people had the ability to make enormous change in their environments, they needed to do it together. Another principle: ***We shall encourage people to work with one another.***

The first challenge was to get people to apply for these grants. We were interested in giving money to people to do after-school homework clubs, or group art projects, or fixing up elder's homes. I learned that distributing printed information wasn't going to do it – we had to get out there and tell people about it, and convince them that they could get this money.

Through a series of neighborhood meetings, word slowly spread about this foundation that was interested in giving money to people – regular people – to do what they believed would be good for the neighborhood they lived in. By talking to lots of individuals, I would identify a core group of neighborhood residents who were connected



to lots of other residents. I would invite them to a meeting at a neighborhood coffee shop and ask them to help me plan a larger neighborhood information meeting. We would serve a free dinner and provide free babysitting. And we would tell them about this free money – money that was available for them to try out their ideas, their dreams. Another principle: ***We shall go to where the people are.***

The most common comment I heard at these meetings? “I can’t believe The Denver Foundation is here asking us what we want to do.” Having lived in the nonprofit world for so many years, I had come to expect people to know about nonprofits and about the foundations that helped to support them. It was obvious that outside the formal nonprofit structure, The Denver Foundation was unknown. Heck, foundations in general were an unknown. This was humbling to all of us, staff and volunteers, and accentuated the importance of reaching out.

How has this changed The Denver Foundation? What were the events, small and large, that moved the Foundation from inaccessible to approachable, from elitist to community-friendly?

- We brought the power structure to the people. Trustees and committee members would attend the neighborhood information meetings, the banker and the utilities company CEO breaking bread with and listening to neighborhood residents. Sharing a meal brings people closer together, and the meetings illustrated the power of listening. I have become a better listener because of this.
- The Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee changed the “face” of the Foundation. It began recruiting residents of the targeted neighborhoods to serve alongside the board of trustee members. Eventually, resident members of the Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee were recruited to be members of the Board of Trustees. As the Board expanded its inclusiveness, these new voices had an impact. In 2003, the Board of Trustees approved the Foundation’s first-ever policy on anti-discrimination policies and practices of grantee organizations.
- The diversity and inclusiveness of The Denver Foundation’s staff increased as a result of who was hired for Strengthening Neighborhoods. We hired the only bilingual Program Officer in the Foundation’s history. An African-American support staff person with family roots in the civil rights movement was promoted to As-

sistant Program Officer. A Mexican-born immigrant was hired for his community organizing skills and ability to provide hands-on technical assistance to Spanish-speaking residents taking on leadership roles in neighborhoods groups.

- As the staff and the board became more reflective of the racial and ethnic diversity of the community, the Strengthening Neighborhoods program took off. In 2005, the number of grant applications sky-rocketed. Groups of neighbors of all kinds sought us out. Yet another principle: If we look like them, they will come.
- Continually looking for ways to develop neighborhood assets, early in its history, Strengthening Neighborhoods hosted a forum on community organizing, where organizers, and the CEOs of the companies they organized against, came together in a dialogue about neighborhood leadership. As a result, The Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative made large grants of \$25,000 and above, primarily to community organizing groups that impacted multiple neighborhoods.
- In 2000, when reviewing funding priorities for the Community Grants Program, the Foundation's primary grantmaking program, the Board of Trustees unanimously adopted a priority in Civic & Education that reads: Enhance neighborhood assets by involving residents in strengthening their own neighborhoods. Funding of organizations using organizing and advocacy as tools of community change increased in the Community Grants Program. In 2005, The Denver Foundation became one of six funders tapped to be part of the Philanthropic Community Organizing Collaborative, funded by the Ford Foundation.

This is especially amazing when one considers that during the first year I was at the Foundation, the executive director of the largest community organizing entity in Denver told me that he had been given the brush-off just a couple of years earlier. He was told, "The Denver Foundation is just not interested in funding community organizing, so you shouldn't bother applying." Times do change.

This reinvestment in the oh-so-powerful tool of community organizing was invigorating to me. The Strengthening Neighborhoods program was a major force in reshaping the Foundation's financial investments – it was putting power back into the people's hands. It made me realize that, even though it takes time, you can turn the ocean liner around.

As I reflect on the impact of the resident-centered, asset-based work of Strengthening Neighborhoods, I am stunned by the many ways in which this relatively small program has changed the face of The Denver Foundation. The evidence:

- Transparency – openness about how the foundation does things and with whom  
– is routine

- *Being a responsive and accessible community resource is expected*
- *Listening to the community is now an imperative*
- *Flexibility and innovation are highly prized*
- *Diversity and inclusiveness has expanded at the staff level, among Board and other volunteers, and in the types of grantees*
- *Collaborative efforts are a priority*

*There is no turning back, for either The Denver Foundation, or for me. The work going forward is about continually broadening the term “community” to include marginalized people of all kinds, to encourage nonprofit institutions to engage the people they serve not as clients but as collaborators, to insist that all non-profits and foundations embrace inclusiveness, and to require foundations to be transparent in all ways.*

***We shall trust in the people.***

***We shall encourage people to work with one another.***

***We shall go to where the people are.***