

People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER)

Like many cities, Austin, Texas has two sides of town. East Austin is the poor side – the side with high proportions of people of color (Mexican and African-American) and a majority of families living in or near poverty. The segregation is a legacy of Austin’s 1931 “Master Plan” (called the “Yes, Master!” Plan by activists), which forced people of color into East Austin neighborhoods and placed 65% of the city’s industrial zoning there, too – along with 35% of Austin’s less restricted commercial zoning.

East Austin’s zoning had undermined the community for decades. The concentration of industrial and commercial zoning created an environmental wasteland in which corporations felt free to operate dangerously and illegally, without fear of any repercussions. For example, six different oil companies stored gasoline and jet fuel in above-ground storage tanks on a 52-acre “Tank Farm” that leaked toxins into the air, ground, and water. Brown Ferris Industries (BFI) operated a recycling plant in the middle of a residential area, with huge recycling trucks rumbling through the streets at all hours and pieces of litter strewn around by the slightest breeze.

An organized group of local residents got rid of both these blights and many others, creating a sense of community and power in the process. PODER, the organization that grew out of these efforts, is both the Spanish verb for “power” or “empowerment” and the acronym for People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources. Originally formed in 1991, PODER redefines environmental issues as social and economic justice issues by working through and with neighborhood associations in East Austin. The partnership is significant not only because of its accomplishments, but also because it overcame the “divide-and-

conquer” strategy that city officials had used to pit 400 neighborhood associations against one another (and to exclude any other type of organization from the flow of information that affected neighborhood residents). PODER can be thought of as a sort of super-partnership, bringing together neighborhood associations (significantly, representing different racial and ethnic enclaves) as well as individual residents in a powerful, effective combination.

PODER’s participants are diverse and active. The partnership deliberately includes not only people of different races and ethnicities, but also brings together young and old as well as male and female. PODER members meet weekly and regularly go door-to-door throughout East Austin to communicate directly with other residents – both to hear their concerns and to keep them informed about meetings and public hearings. A weekly radio show, web site, newsletter, videos, and brochures add to the constant flow of information.

Using Collaboration to Take On the Tank Farm

PODER’s first battle against the Tank Farm created a model of empowering communities to solve problems – a model that has been applied successfully to many other environmental justice issues. (Continuing its tradition of acronyms, a citizen’s monitoring committee for the Tank Farm became known as the Tankfarm Area Neighborhood Council, or TANK.)

At first, many East Austin residents were resigned to the presence of fumes, groundwater contamination, and noxious emissions from the tanks. After all, the six oil companies – Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, Citgo, Texaco, and Coastal States – had millions of dollars at their disposal, and were prepared to use them to protect their storage facilities. Individual attempts to deal with the oil companies had failed, making people hesitant about trying again. And everyone knew they would be fighting not just one multinational corporation (which would be hard enough), but six of them at once.

PODER knew it could not compete financially. In contrast to the oil companies' well-funded public relations and legal operations, PODER was taking up collections to make copies of its flyers. But its founders also didn't accept that nothing could be done. It's better to do something than nothing, they reasoned – and if it didn't work, at least they would have tried.

One potential asset was strength in numbers. An early alliance with East Austin Strategy Team (EAST), an African-American neighborhood coalition, made PODER's numbers even stronger. The two groups convened weekly meetings in a local senior activity center and started a process of constant communication among everyone in the neighborhood – a tradition that continues a decade later. Today, elected officials leave their City Hall chambers and come to East Austin on a quarterly basis to speak directly with neighborhood residents. (This is a role they should have taken on naturally long ago, PODER activists point out, but no one had ever held them to it.)

An early and strategic decision was to make sure that people from East Austin had opportunities to speak for themselves. "People don't speak in sound bites," explained PODER's founder. "We had to educate officials and service providers about letting people tell their stories in their own ways." Spanish-speakers who were uncomfortable speaking up were encouraged to do so, with PODER providing translators for them. Government agency representatives, elected officials, and oil company executives had to come to the community, instead of the other way around, in what became true accountability sessions.

Information was also important – unassailable research and facts demonstrating the health and environmental harm that the Tank Farm was causing. In addressing other issues as well, PODER members (particularly its younger members) have participated in carefully documenting the situation at hand and

building a strong case for what types of changes must take place in response to the issues they identify.

Much to everyone's surprise – even PODER's – the tanks were gone within a year. Along with them went a sense of powerlessness and of accepting things the way they were and always had been. Residents learned that they could have a voice – a strong voice – in what happened to them, but they needed to use the tools of awareness and collective action to pressure change.

Waste Not, Want Not

Next up was the BFI waste management facility that polluted the air, showered the neighborhood trees with pieces of litter, and shattered the early morning calm with loud trucks and crashing containers. Using the same methods – building awareness, identifying options for change, and putting pressure on those who could make changes happen – PODER and its allies in the neighborhood associations got rid of the recycling center *and* forced BFI to agree it would not relocate to another residential neighborhood.

Getting rid of the facilities was a great victory, but PODER did not stop there. The battle taught them that the facilities were just a symptom of a deeper problem: unfair zoning laws. First, PODER got the City Council to rezone the BFI property so that other industries could not replace it. In fact, at PODER's urging, the City Council passed an ordinance that requires industries to notify residents and neighborhood associations before they locate a site in a residential neighborhood. PODER also got the City to publicly accept responsibility for allowing BFI to operate where it did for so long. For the first time since 1931, thanks to PODER's efforts, East Austin residents have a voice in planning decisions.

Allowing dangerous industrial and commercial development within residential neighborhoods was only one of the adverse effects of Austin's discriminatory zoning policies. Another was that East Austin residents were unable to obtain home equity loans or funds to rebuild after fires. In response, PODER was able to negotiate zoning changes from industrial and commercial to residential. Over 600 community properties were re-zoned. These and other changes allowed local people to hold onto their properties as residential properties and to remove incompatible industries and facilities from their neighborhoods.

One irony of PODER's land use and rezoning efforts is that they have made East Austin more attractive to outsiders as well as to people who have lived in the neighborhood for decades. Because the neighborhood is near downtown and more affordable than other Austin neighborhoods, it is appealing to young professionals, who are buying homes and driving property values up dramatically. For the working poor, though, increased property values are not an advantage – not if they want to stay where they are. A sudden appreciation in home values can force people out of their homes when they can no longer afford property taxes. PODER's extensive research on housing and tax records revealed a spike in East Austin home values – and that two-thirds of all Austin foreclosures in 2000-2001 were in East Austin. PODER's members convinced the City of Austin to declare a historic zoning moratorium and to reduce taxes for 200 community properties. The group continues to pressure the city of Austin to take these and other means to protect existing East Austin residents from the forces of gentrification, instead of pushing them – once again – further east.

Building Leadership: The Next Generation of Activists

Youth are an important force within PODER; in fact, one of the goals of the organization's founders is to turn the leadership of the entire organization over to the next generation. PODER's Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) program recruits and trains high school and college students to be organizers and leaders

in their own communities, offering a combination of internships and stipends to make this possible. Whenever a training opportunity is available – especially at conferences or meetings outside of East Austin – PODER tries hard to make it possible for young people to participate. Many young people in the neighborhood have never been outside of East Austin, and the connection to others with similar concerns about social justice can be empowering in many different ways. “Young people,” says one of PODER’s founders, “need to see that it’s OK to speak out!”

Youth contribute to every aspect of the PODER’s work, including the research that makes it possible to raise awareness and advocate for change, door-to-door surveys to reach people and hear their views, coming up with new ideas, and making real changes possible. For example, YSJ participants spent time in East Austin bus stops questioning bus riders about routes and schedules. They passed their findings along to city transportation officials, who increased service on some of the routes, provided extended service hours (to 3:00 a.m.), and added bus shelters so that people would not have to wait in the sun or rain. A survey of staff at the Austin Parks and Recreation Department revealed no women in top positions – another practice that was researched, identified, and changed by PODER’s next generation of activists. A year later, after recommending increases in female director and co-director positions, the group went back to the parks and found real changes in the composition of staff, especially by gender. This, in turn, led to increased participation by girls in parks and recreation programs.

Adults everywhere are familiar with the experience of having young people know much more about computers than their elders, and PODER is no exception. The YSJ group has taken on the task of helping community members and PODER leaders cross the digital divide by teaching them how to use technology for advocacy. A 19-year-old heads this effort, which is called the Technology, Education, Advocacy, and Mobilization (TEAM) project.

Pathways to Collaboration

Like the other partnerships in the Workgroup, PODER wants to build on its accomplishments to become even more of a resource to the people in its community. Every success, from the very first one against the oil companies and their tanks, has come out of a collaborative process that brings people together, gives them an opportunity to speak for themselves, and enables them to join forces to address the community issues that really matter to them. For PODER, the process is also part of the solution, building relationships and leadership that enable community residents to collectively overcome the feeling that they must accept things as they are.

Understanding how their collaborative process works so well, and what they could do to make it work better, is very important to PODER members. PODER's Board of Directors never has "retreats," since that's not a word that applies to them very well. Instead, they have board "reflections." Becoming part of the Pathways Workgroup will be an important element of the group's reflections – examining what they have done and refining and improving their partnership by learning about the collaborative strategies of other partnerships.

Central to the work of all of the Pathways partnerships is the framing of issues and problems from the perspective of the people who are directly experiencing them. PODER's mission – redefining environmental issues as social and economic justice issues – puts this front and center. Several years ago, around the time of PODER's 10th anniversary, PODER put this principle into action when it noticed that Earth Day was being co-opted by corporations that were polluting the environment, turning Earth Day into a corporate-sponsored, commercial event. The partnership bumped up its anniversary date (May 1st) by a few days to overlap with Earth Day and sponsored a "Reclaiming Earth Day" event. The partnership planted seeds, read poetry, danced, sang, and blessed

and shared food in an event that is now a new annual tradition and PODER anniversary.

Through its community-driven collaborative process, PODER has reclaimed not just the symbolism of Earth Day, but the literal earth of East Austin. Through the Pathways workgroup, the partnership is eager to help others do the same.