



## ***“One of the Greatest Things I’ve Ever Done”***

### Profile

Center for Neighborhood Leadership Apprenticeship Program  
New York City

### **Program Highlights**

- Full-time, paid, 10-month organizing apprenticeships with New York City community-based organizations.
- Over 60 organizers trained.
- Personalized supervision and classroom instruction.
- Over 90% completion rate and successful job or educational placement following graduation.
- Racial and ethnic diversity of the apprentices reflects organizing and community development organizations in New York City, and hiring priorities in the field.
- An Advanced Organizer’s Fellowship, offered with the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, sustains experienced organizers.

### **Purpose of this Profile**

The Community Learning Partnership added its financial and other support to working with the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD) to establish ANHD’s Center for Neighborhood Leadership and the Apprenticeship Program as part of our local site development in New York City. After several successful cohorts completed the Apprenticeship Program, we interviewed program graduates in order to better understand the core elements of this very successful experiential learning initiative. The Apprenticeship offers valuable insights for how to best combine field-based experience with classroom learning to produce well-trained organizing staff.

### **Addressing the Need for Trained Organizers**

The Center for Neighborhood Leadership’s Apprenticeship Program trains ten community and tenant organizers annually and is graduating its 6<sup>th</sup> cohort in Spring 2014. The program combines the-job training and intensive classroom learning. It is increasingly recognized throughout New York City as the response to a clear need: trained organizers, especially

organizers who represent their own low-income communities and communities of color. The completion and placement rates reflect the program's success. In five years, only two apprentices have been unable to complete the program, and over 90% of the graduates report obtaining community change jobs upon graduating, or continuing their education.

Each apprentice works four days a week under an experienced supervisor. The apprentices meet weekly as a cohort, with an instructor. Readings, classroom discussion and assignments support their work experiences and offer the opportunity for reflection and extensive peer support.

The Center for Neighborhood Leadership is a project of the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD), a citywide membership organization of over two hundred housing development, advocacy, service and organizing groups. The Apprenticeship program recruits through ANHD's membership and other networks, with considerable competition for slots. Public Allies New York, through the national AmeriCorp service program, provides the apprentice stipends and some of the training sessions. A part-time instructor works with the Center's director to staff the Apprenticeship Program, guided by an Advisory Board.

The New York Foundation has been an integral supporter of the Center and the Apprenticeship Program since the beginning. The New York Immigration Coalition was also originally a founder of the Center for Neighborhood Leadership and the Apprenticeship Program.

### **Linking Field and Classroom Experiences**

The Apprenticeship curriculum supports participants to bring their entire selves to their apprentice year. This includes their intellect and emotions, previous skills and experiences, as well as questions and concerns. Each class begins with reflection exercises and includes problem-solving sessions. There are ample opportunities for apprentices to think critically, share openly and consider how to maintain their ability to remain healthy and balanced in the work.

The program follows a three-step process in which apprentices learn in class through reading, apply what they learn from their reading to their work, and then reflect on that experience with their cohort. Assignments support the work on the ground, such as conducting one-on-one and reporting on leadership development activities.

The curriculum covers theories of community change, as well as approaches to social policy making. Apprentices explore their personal vision and the mission statements for their host organizations. Skills include both organizer basics and organizational development, such as base-building, facilitation, training design, leadership identification and recruitment, campaign development, program design and planning, capacity-building, and creating unity, accountability and inclusivity in an organization. Issue areas of focus include youth engagement, affordable housing, and neighborhood and community sustainability.

## **Core Components of Effective Field-Based Learning**

### **1) Program Success Begins with Targeted, Thorough Recruitment**

Graduates of the Apprenticeship Program highlight the value, to start, of the Apprenticeship Program's active recruitment. Some maintain that they would not otherwise have become organizers if someone had not reached out and encouraged them to apply.

Joel Ponder of the Action Group at Queens Community House grew up in Panama and worked on community and immigrant issues for several years. When a friend who had graduated from the Apprenticeship Program suggested he apply, he expressed reluctance because of his limited English language skills and concern that he would fall behind the group. His friend pressed him: "Put that aside," she urged him. "It's just what you need." When Joel overcame his hesitancy, applied and gained a spot in the program, he participated with growing confidence. He reflects on his experience as an apprentice as being, "One of the greatest things I've ever done."

Sheila Garcia of CASA (New Settlement Apartments Community Action for Safe Apartments) in the Bronx, gained insight from the extensive group interview that is part of the assessment process. Exercises, games and briefings offer information about the job of an organizer and what to expect from the apprenticeship. Participating in this three-hour process, Sheila shifted her career plans from being an art teacher to becoming an organizer. "This is for me," she decided in concluding the interview. "I want to be an organizer even if I don't get in!"

### **2) Apprentices Need to Learn from Experienced Organizers and from Peers**

Several participants stress how much they benefitted from the vast experiences and facilitation skills of the program instructors. Instructors expertly established trust and mutual support. They shared from their direct experience and created, what one graduate recalls as "the space to talk about the really hard things that are going on at work."

Another participant found it useful to have a range of guest speakers talk about different approaches to community organizing. Jenny Cruz of Housing Court Answers, a citywide organization, appreciated "being exposed to wonderful, amazing women who know a lot about organizing." Enrique Colon of CASA says, "I found the history of community organizing of great interest, seeing different styles of community organizing, hearing different perspectives on it."

One cohort included an apprentice with thirty years of experience organizing in Central America and the United States. His "wealth of experience and struggle helped build bonds among people in the class, and helped us learn how rich the field is, with so many different styles of organizing, and how we can build on that experience."

The program helped the apprentices overcome isolation as they faced the challenges of a new career. Some refer to their cohort as a "family." They received advice from peers in similar situations, in an overall, reflective environment." It was "great to get that feedback from other people who are wanting to grow and change," one notes. Jenny Cruz says she benefitted from

having "exceptional peers who really understand and help each other, a support group that is really committed to social justice, a group of people who really want to do it."

Participants note that it was very beneficial when their site supervisor took their training and mentoring role seriously, particularly when they coordinated the work experience with the class topics. Several graduates recall a range of experience levels among their site supervisors. Some say the classroom side of the apprenticeship supplemented what they could learn from their site supervisors, who were newer to the field themselves. Others had very experienced supervisors, with ten or more years of experience.

Jessica Nizar of the Riders Alliance, a citywide organization, comments that she finds she needs to keep rethinking and relearning different aspects of the work, so a mixture of backgrounds in a program like the Apprenticeship program is actually very helpful.

### **3) Classroom and Field Work Must Align**

The graduates are enthusiastic about how participatory and directly applicable their classroom training was. In class, they learned and practiced basic skills. Joel Ponder reflects, "We learned all the tools of organizing. I learned to do one-on-ones in an entirely different way, which I'm now applying and it is strengthening my organization. I learned to be much more in touch with my community. I learned about running meetings, icebreakers, closing circles. The program provided an intense education on running a campaign, conducting a power analysis. I'm now applying all that to rebuilding my organization."

Jessica Nizar says, "It gave me a really clear framework for the work I was doing, a framework of what it would take to build the ideal membership organization. It gave us a perspective on less than ideal organizations as well."

The strong emphasis in the classroom on the fundamentals of good organizing gave some participants a framework to assess that their placement organization was not doing base building or organizing. They were able to change their placement to an organization where they could directly learn those skills.

In building a new organization after graduating, Jenny Cruz holds monthly meetings with community residents, saying that she "learned about meeting people where they are, working with different types of people and figuring out how to move them."

### **4) Focusing on Self-Care Sustains Organizers for the Long-Term**

Several graduates cite the emphasis in the program on self-care. One comments, "Maintaining a work/life balance is very difficult. Knowing that when you start the work is helpful; you have to set out for yourself what the boundaries are, as no boss will do that." This, combined with ample opportunities to commiserate and learn with peers strengthened their capacity to overcome obstacles and avoid becoming discouraged in their organizing work. Sheila Garcia directly makes the connection, recalling, "the opportunity for others to give me critical feedback on how to solve a problem, and not burn out."

## **5) Training Programs can offer Examples and Serve as Building Blocks**

Roy Frias of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in the Bronx speaks about how his organization is developing a variation on the apprenticeship with its youth leadership. It has created the Community Organizing and Leadership Academy, which is developing eleven young people as paid organizers.

CASA has used the Apprenticeship Program as a building block. CASA has had an apprentice each year and hired three graduates. Sheila Garcia, Patty Torres, and Enrique Colon, who was a CASA member before becoming an apprentice. CASA is becoming known throughout the city for its local organizing in over 15 buildings, its housing-related participatory action research reports, and its work on a range of housing issues affecting the Bronx.

CASA's director, Susana Blankely, participated in another program piloted by the Center for Neighborhood Leadership, the Advanced Organizer's Fellowship. This year-long academic program for experienced organizers was developed in collaboration with the Community Learning Partnership and offered in partnership with the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College.

## **6) Cohort Approach Helps Build Professional Networks**

Since the program is rooted in a citywide coalition whose members take on joint issue campaigns, or who work on similar issues, it provides apprentices with common campaigns to analyze and common issues to discuss. This provides a strong sense of purpose to each cohort.

Apprentices all value the citywide relationships they developed. Patricia Torres of CASA describes how much she appreciates "having a really strong network of organizations in the city which my organization could work with." The cohort-based program also fosters ongoing connection, alumni interactions and a network of colleagues for problem solving. All contribute to the pride graduates express in being former apprentices.

### **Contact**

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### **About the Community Learning Partnership**

The Community Learning Partnerships is a national network of Community Change Studies programs, establishing authentic partnerships among community organizations and institutions of higher education. We develop and institutionalize courses of study leading to Certificates and Degrees in community organizing, community development and community change.

[www.communitylearningpartnership.org](http://www.communitylearningpartnership.org)