

PARENT PROFILES

THERE IS A LEADER IN EVERYONE

ROSALZIA GRILLIER

“The COFI Way is that there is a leader in everyone and you can build a relationship with everyone,” says Rosazlia Grillier. She first got involved with COFI “through a tragedy which now I would say has turned to triumph.” Rosazlia had been diagnosed with lymphoma. “I was in a deep state of depression and had eaten myself to over 480 pounds. I was in a wheelchair, feeling really helpless.

The doctors told my family, ‘Make her comfortable, she’s got about six months.’ I went to a training and little did I know I would meet COFI there. COFI helped me change my entire life. I learned more effective ways to communicate with my family and now use my skills to be a community leader.”

“The Early Learning Campaign is one of many campaigns that comes to mind,” she says. “People said there weren’t any unenrolled pre-K and Head Start children in Englewood and I knew it wasn’t true. We did surveys, wrote a report and held forums. From there we decided to do a festival where families could actually enroll their kids in Head Start or other preschool programs. We filled every open slot. That’s what sparked the idea for Head Start Ambassadors who could help get children enrolled. As a result, we’ve reached thousands of families across the city with this initiative.”

“Today, here I stand, 250 pounds lighter. I’ve been in Washington, meeting legislators and the President. Thank God I got a second chance! I want to bring what happened to me to everyone.”



NOBODY IS GOING TO DO THAT BUT US

FELIPA MENA



In 2009, Felipa Mena’s life changed dramatically when her 20-year-old son Angel was killed by street violence. Before that, Felipa, a Mexican immigrant mother of five, had long organized to make life better for low-income families and working women,

but her son’s death impassioned her to help stem community violence. Working with COFI and other activist mothers, Felipa created the Wells Community Academy High School “Peace Center” (Angel had attended the school). She worked closely with high school students in peace circles, providing a safe place to talk about what’s happening in their lives. She also mentors immigrant, Spanish-speaking mothers to become policy change leaders in Chicago, goes door-to-door to connect low-income and immigrant families to early learning resources, and much more. In 2013, Felipa was awarded the Chicago Foundation for Women’s Impact Award.

“It’s important for parents to get together and decide what they want to change,” says Felipa. “They can figure out who is willing to help. COFI teaches us about developing a web of support for these kinds of efforts. Parents know what’s going on in their communities. Policymakers just have data and they’re just reading things to make decisions. Parents are living in those communities. We, as parents, need to take the initiative to make changes and protect our children because nobody is going to do that but us.”

Parent Peace Centers offer an alternative to punitive school discipline and connect students with the listening ear of a parent from their community.





BREAK THAT CYCLE

ROSALVA NAVA

Fifteen years ago, Rosalva Nava was a victim of brutal domestic violence. Hopeless and frightened, she was moments away from taking her own life when her young daughter walked in on her. In that moment, Rosalva was reminded that she had something—someone—to live for. That very day, she saw a flyer her daughter brought home from school announcing a parent leadership training course. She signed up, and Rosalva shares what she learned. “Sometimes women take care of our families first and forget about ourselves,” she says. “That’s what I like about the COFI training—it talks about self and then your family. Once you take care of yourself you can take care of your family.”

In recent years, Rosalva has traveled to Washington, D.C. to testify on the power of restorative justice in schools. She helped pass legislation that allows low-income families to save money for their children’s college and future without the risk of losing public benefits.

“Until I came to COFI, I didn’t know I could channel anger into passion—and passion into action and change,” she says. Now, when working on poverty issues, she tells other women that they “have an opportunity to break that cycle of poverty.” She has been involved in the Stepping Out of Poverty Campaign. One result: a payroll card bill in Illinois that prevents employees from being charged to access their paychecks.

“COFI is like a door opening,” she says. “When you step in the door, you don’t want to come back out.”

East St. Louis parents just started COFI training and have already won new crossing guards, parking at the preschool and developmental screenings and early intervention services for hundreds of local infants and toddlers.



WE JUST HAVE TO TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

LETTIE HICKS

In the small southern Illinois city of East St. Louis, Lettie Hicks knew that schools in her community faced many challenges; now she’s part of a group of parents that is doing something about it.

Lettie, who has three children—ages 15, 14 and 2 years— belongs to a group called Parents United for Change, which was formed with support from COFI. She says she was inspired to join after hearing testimony from another COFI parent, Rosazlia Grillier. She and other mothers conducted door-to-door surveys in East St. Louis and found that the need for safer neighborhoods and transportation to school and preschool were prominent issues.

“Being part of COFI taught me that I do have a voice,” she says. “I have also found that there are other parents who stand for the same thing—safety for our children.”

Lettie, who spent much of her childhood in various foster homes, is now helping to lead efforts at two schools in the community, Vivian Adams Early Childhood Center and Dunbar Elementary School. At

Adams, she says there is little room for parents to park. At Dunbar, she says kids “have to walk through a vacant park and sometimes abandoned alleyways to get to school. When there are people in the park, there’s often drug activity or a lot of drinking. Then when you get to the school, the sidewalk is very limited. At both schools now, we’re making noise, and a lot of people are responding. We won a new crossing guard and parking spots at the early childhood center. Now we just have to take it to the next level.”

“Being part of COFI taught me that I do have a voice. I have also found that there are other parents who stand for the same thing—safety for our children.”

