

VISION

We asked four women who know COFI well to share their thoughts about the future and potential of the organization and its work.

BUILDING LEADERS

FELIPA MENA, PARENT LEADER AND POWER-PAC CO-CHAIR

When I first got involved in 2001, there were 40 or 50 parents who were a part of COFI. Now there are 400 to 500, and more and more

parents are taking leadership roles in their schools and communities. The importance of sharing our stories and experience is still such a big part of what we do.

How do we continue our work in the future? We can apply the COFI model, see what changes need

to be made and just keep informing families. For example, when we started to work on early learning issues, parents weren't really informed about their options. When we speak to them, now, we help them understand how they qualify for programs. In the next couple of years, I want to see the education system understand more than just what's going on in the schools—it's also about what happens in our communities. To learn about that, people in the school system should talk to us. Students talk to us and we understand them because we're in the same community and listen to them.

COFI is working in so many places—in Chicago, Aurora, Evanston, East St. Louis, Elgin, and in many other places around the country where COFI trains people. My dream is for COFI to keep training people, building leaders and impacting the political system. It's really part of the COFI way to be thinking about the future.



THE WORD IS HOPE

ROSAZLIA GRILLIER, PARENT LEADER AND POWER-PAC CO-CHAIR

COFI has already expanded to communities outside of Chicago. And we're working nationally to reach people as well. I believe we can go worldwide. Look at the climate of our country right now: There are so many people struggling with issues they have in common with other people—equality of education, poverty, homelessness, lack of jobs, incarceration of our children.

These commonalities are like the glue that bring us together. COFI does it a little different than everybody else by making the families and communities a part of the structure and planning of what it does. We meet people where they are. COFI is about empowering parents, and then they evolve.

Take, for example, the work COFI has done to create children's savings accounts, which can give children in our communities the freedom to pursue higher education. We've met with the State Treasurer's Office, and we're building a movement. A lot of children don't aspire to go to college—it's not part of the conversation. Just the fact that we're building a college mentality is big.

"When I look to the future of COFI, I don't just see issues—I see what comes before and while you work on issues. COFI is about relationship-building—between parents, but also with our adversaries. We partner with almost everybody. The future of COFI? The word that comes to my mind is hope."



COFI has trained 4,000 parents in its leadership development program.





Parents share stories of their restorative justice work at a school-based Parent Peace Center with trainees from COFI's national Institute session.



PARENTS FEEL VALUED

GRACIELA SUAREZ, LEAD ORGANIZER AND FORMER COFI PARENT LEADER

I was a young parent and new immigrant to Chicago when I met COFI in 1998. I went through the training and saw the things you can do yourself. I was amazed. I saw this model work and make a big difference. That happened to me, and that's why I became a trainer. I see myself every time I go to a training; I think, "there's another person like me in the training." People find support and motivation and have something in common with other people.

Through the COFI model, every person's goals and dreams are important. What we see is that people who participate in the trainings are more comfortable and confident. It's common for moms to say, "Now I know my story can help another family."

When people look at big issues—like education and safety in their communities—they ask "How can we change things—how can we improve our community?" For COFI, the answer is that parents are always part of the change. They are working together with the community; they know what the needs are and they collaborate with each other and partners in the community.

My vision for the future? I want to see COFI outside of Chicago and in other parts of the country. It's all about building and creating relationships. I really think parents feel valued at COFI. After that, they become part of a community that can make a difference on policy issues. As I look ahead, I see how COFI can grow as an organization of parents who will become leaders and improve their communities in Illinois and around the country.

IT STARTS WITH ONE PERSON

VERONICA ANDERSON, COFI BOARD OF TRUSTEES CHAIR

COFI offers an authentic and sustainable model to engage communities that are often left out of conversations about policy—and even left out of the decision-making structure that affects their own quality of life. I hope that COFI's model is replicated, whether that happens through COFI expanding or COFI's approach being adopted.

COFI is distinctive because it starts with one person and their personal, family and community goals. You can't really do what you want in the world without taking care of yourself first. Consider one example—the Elementary Justice Campaign. Back in the early 2000s, we would see 7-year-olds, and especially black boys, suspended at an alarming rate. Through POWER-PAC, a cross-community organization, COFI-trained parents worked with the Chicago Public Schools to change the CPS Code of Conduct. The results included ending suspensions for 2nd grade (and younger students) and reducing expulsions for 5th grade (and younger students).

With COFI, everything is connected to the personal experience and stories of parents. It's very encouraging and exciting.

In the last few years, COFI has done more capacity-building work. I see great potential for this model to keep reaching more and more parents and communities. Yes, it's a long-term approach: you have to cultivate a group of parent leaders, build trust and learn how to work together. The COFI model is definitely applicable and can be used anywhere.



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