



May/June 1997

## Organize!

# Tenderloin Senior Organizing Project

*By Mike Miller*

"It's hard to do this – I was scared," said Robin King, one of the younger women living in a building organized by the Tenderloin Senior Organizing Project (TSOP), which actively organized tenants in San Francisco's deteriorated Tenderloin district from 1980 to 1995. Matt Bixby, another resident, added, "Lydia [the organizer] had to drag us kicking and screaming into these meetings. But we had to do it to save our housing."

The Tenderloin invites social concern. Once home to elderly Anglos, it now reflects the multi-ethnic and multi-racial character of San Francisco's low-income people. Accustomed to services and advocacy in their behalf from a dense network of community-based nonprofit organizations, most Tenderloin residents lacked influence over decisions that directly affected their lives. TSOP's "service" was to provide community organizers to start local tenant associations and give these groups continuing assistance.

## TSOP Organizing

TSOP organizing typically began when a tenant called up wanting help with a landlord problem. The "help" received wasn't what was expected. In a personal meeting with the caller, a TSOP organizer learned about the problems in the building, offered a sympathetic ear, and began developing a trusting relationship with the tenant who typically hoped TSOP would solve the problem. The organizer's proposition was simple but not easy: "We'll help you organize your neighbors so you can take care of problems, but you have to want to do it." Frequently taken aback, the tenant often said, "but I thought you were supposed to help people like me." Thus began a conversation about the importance of residents organizing themselves with the assistance of TSOP's community organizing staff.

On being prodded to do things themselves, Robin King said, "Lydia got us to find out for ourselves what we were supposed to do." Matt said, "I hated school, and here comes Lydia acting like a teacher. I don't want to say she 'taught' us. I think she instructed us. Is there a difference?... I didn't used to know the people I live with, but now I do, and I care about what happens to them."

TSOP organizers wanted a tenant commitment. It could be door-knocking, providing introductions to the one or two people the tenant might already know, and/or identifying someone who knew other people living there. In an atmosphere dominated by fear, getting one tenant to take the first step toward organizing was a major breakthrough. Further, that tenant could invite the organizer into the building as a guest, thus giving him or her a way to slip by building managers who were not well-disposed to tenant organizers in their buildings.

TSOP's pattern was usually the same: an organizer met individually with people and identified leaders or potential leaders; the organizer convened a small group of resident leaders and challenged them to develop a tenant association; some tenants grumbled about why the organizer wouldn't do it for the residents. Where successful, a hurdle was crossed: the planning committee learned about agendas and conducting meetings; its members invited residents to attend; those who came adopted proposals to present to a "decision-maker," such as a landlord or property manager. If he/she failed to meet with tenants, that absence became the reason for direct action. If he/she came and negotiated an acceptable agreement, tenants held a celebration. If not, the organizer and tenants planned another action or campaign. The process usually took from six weeks to

three months. With various tactics, the tenant associations' records were good: many victories, some defeats, no evictions. In the best-organized buildings, a new sense of community and solidarity emerged. Isolation, suspicion, and competition over scarce favors distributed by building managers began to give way to a cooperative spirit among tenants.

Over fifteen years of such organizing, TSOP demonstrated important lessons. Beyond their specific victories, the tenant associations that TSOP helped organize showed the capacity of some of the most marginalized Americans to learn, grow, and become active in organizations to improve their quality of life. TSOP's approach challenged advocates who believe that they can better speak for the oppressed than the oppressed themselves.

TSOP's experience of bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds defies the prevailing view, widely held by people of good will, that racism, sexism, ageism, classism, homophobia, and other destructive "isms" are too deeply ingrained in most Americans to be overcome without a lengthy "re-education" process. The tenant associations demonstrated people's deep yearning to participate in something beyond their family or the pursuit of personal goals. The associations tapped the human desire to be included in a community and to share one's life in meaningful ways with others.

## Endings

TSOP – the only organization in the Tenderloin whose mission was to work with residents to "form autonomous, democratic tenant associations," the organization that provided the link, the organizing staff, the place where a deeper community could be created – lost its funding and closed its doors. Matt Bixby, an alcoholic always on the edge, sank deeper into his alcoholism; he was evicted for nonpayment of rent and left the state. Now back, he is occasionally spotted in the neighborhood. Robin King disappeared into the street life of the Tenderloin, at first occasionally reappearing to check in with her TSOP friends, then, after a couple of months, not to be seen again. In the Tenderloin, where millions are spent on services and hundreds of thousands on advocacy, there wasn't \$125,000 to keep TSOP's doors open.

Copyright 1997

---

*Mike Miller is the executive director of the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center, 415-821-6180.*

(Read a [letter to the editor](#) about this article.)

---

[Back to May/June 1997 index.](#)

**NHI** National Housing Institute [Sponsors](#) | [E-Mail](#) | [Home](#) | [Search](#)