

## BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

### Greater Boston Interfaith Organization

If Frank knows Gerthy's story, they have the beginning of a relationship. If Frank and Gerthy know each other's stories, and Karmyn's story as well, they share the possibility for the beginning of an organization.

“One on one, people have to tell each other their stories,” says organizer Julia Greene, of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). “I ask people to tell each other four things: *Who are you? What do you like? What troubles you? What would you like to do about it?* People get to know each other, to trust each other. You begin to incorporate the other person's story into who you are. You start to be willing to work together because you have shared personal stories that highlight your similarities.”

Greene recalls one “Fish Bowl” conversation in a church parish hall in the city's Dorchester section. “At a community training meeting of thirty or forty people -- a really mixed group of old-time white residents, Cape Verdeans, Haitians, a real United Nations session -- two people agreed to have a one-on-one while the rest of us watched and listened. One...was an older Irish-American woman who had lived in Dorchester her whole life. The other was a...younger, South Vietnamese man who had come here as a teenager, then gotten married and stayed in the community. *‘I like it here,’ the man says, ‘I want to raise my family here.’ ‘I’m glad you’re here,’ the woman says. And then she adds, ‘I really like this neighborhood, too. All the diversity. I don’t even have to travel, I just walk the streets.’* “When the conversation was over,” continues Greene, “the rest of us de-briefed it. One of the other people, when asked what she had learned, said, ‘I really learned that he loves it here. Like I do. I thought he lived here because he had no place else to go.’ ”

Almost four years, and twenty thousand conversations later, hundreds of “House Meetings” were held. It was determined, first, that GBIO members wanted to work together on a big project, and, second, that their major concern was housing. The membership developed three main goals: to increase state funding for affordable living space; to provide more protection for tenants; and to acquire more land on which to build new low-cost housing. They decided that local and state politicians would be sufficiently impressed to take action if GBIO got 100,000 people to sign a petition that listed their goals.

With the accumulated social capital from all their shared stories, GBIO volunteers and staff members hit the streets, working in teams to gather signatures. “I did it for my team and for my boys,” says Gerthy Lahens, a single mother of four who has been twice homeless since arriving in Boston from Haiti in 1985. “We don’t have savings bonds or whatever, so what I can give them is this – hope and meaning, and ways to make things change.”

“One cold winter day,” said organizer Greene, “we had to buy expensive pens, so the ink wouldn’t freeze and we’d lose a signature. A middle-aged white Episcopalian man was working a bus stop in a very African-American section of Roxbury. A black bus driver stopped his bus and opened the door and demanded to know what was going on. After he was told about the housing petition, he said to the volunteer, ‘Come on, get on, I’ll sign it.’ And then he asked the whole bus to sign, and kept the bus there while they did.”

GBIO exceeded its goal, and collected 125,000 signatures. As a result, a Housing Trust Fund was created that will make available one hundred million dollars over the next five years.

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