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How One Charity Has Reshaped America

By Pablo Eisenberg

Born in the crucible of poverty, racial discrimination, and worker injustice in the mountains of Tennessee, the Highlander Research and Education Center has stood as a beacon for democratic change for more than 75 years.

Neither its story nor its formidable accomplishments are widely known, even by many people who have been involved in social- and economic-justice issues.

It is a tale of the common man, common sense, and uncommon courage. While its leadership has been extraordinary, it has been largely peopled by ordinary men and women who came together across racial, class, and cultural lines to transform America into a just society.

The key to Highlander's success has been its belief that the people most affected by poverty and injustice are the ones who must lead the efforts to bring about change.

The Highlander Center was founded in 1932, the height of the Depression, on a farm near Monteagle, Tenn. Myles Horton, then a young activist, and several other advocates for the poor began holding social evenings, classes, and workshops for people who lived nearby.

In particular, residents were interested in getting training to run labor unions and organize people to fight for better lives for the poor. Until the mid-1940s, Highlander was a significant player in developing leadership for the labor movement in the South.

Highlander taught poor people and others how to organize, as well as how to conduct research so they would have the information so essential to successful organizing.

In addition it emphasized that successful organizing requires not just tools and techniques but also a shared emotional understanding of different types of people. At Highlander people regularly came together to eat, sing, dance, recite poetry, and tell stories, activities that build relationships and sustain communal action. For Highlander, sharing music, art, and cultural experiences served as the glue that bound together the leaders it developed and enhanced their sense of solidarity in an often unfriendly environment.

The hymn "We Shall Overcome" was frequently sung by people attending Highlander workshops. The song was adapted by Myles Horton's wife, Zilphia, for popular use and taught to labor and church groups all over the South. It quickly became the theme song for the civil-rights movement. And Highlander has managed to turn it into an even more powerful force. It was given the right to distribute the royalties for commercial use of the song and started a program that provides small grants to cultural and social programs in the South.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Highlander became a cornerstone of the civil-rights movement. It was the first institution in the South to play host to multiracial and multicultural meetings and to bring African-Americans onto its staff and board. It also organized desegregation workshops, summer youth camps for both blacks and whites, voter-registration training sessions, and assistance to the student sit-in movement trying to integrate public facilities. Rosa Parks attended a Highlander workshop just four months before triggering the

Montgomery bus boycott.

Highlander also started what it called citizens schools to recruit local residents to teach literacy, cultural, and political skills, an effort that quickly spread throughout the South.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the center expanded its efforts to aid people fighting for environmental justice and economic equity.

Highlander now offers training to help immigrants learn to advocate in their own behalf, as well as workshops to help activists of different generations trade ideas and cultivate leadership among young people. It has done much to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina to organize to get the aid they deserve.

It is not surprising that throughout most of its history the Highlander center and its staff and leaders have been the subject of heavy harassment, even, at times, persecution. In a region so historically run by predominantly white institutions and leaders, the Southern power structure has not taken kindly to Highlander-trained organizations promoting racial mixing, stronger labor unions, and demands for social change, environmental protection, and changes in how mining companies work.

The center's leaders and supporters have grown used to periodic arrests of staff members and protests by the Ku Klux Klan, as well as negative news-media coverage. Some of their critics accused them of being communist sympathizers.

In 1961 the state of Tennessee revoked Highlander's charter, took over the center, and arrested several staff members. Two months later the center's buildings mysteriously burned. Myles Horton and his colleagues obtained a new charter, temporarily moved to Knoxville, and then relocated the new, renamed Highlander Research and Education Center to its current location in New Market, Tenn.

The very survival of the center, the tenacity of its vision, and the success of its leadership programs are testimonies to the quality and toughness of both the staff and the grass-roots activists who have become the institution's expanding family.

More than 1,100 people from 35 states and 12 countries came to New Market in 2007 to celebrate Highlander's 75th anniversary.

As the organization looks to expand its work in the next decade, it has started a capital campaign to raise \$5-million. It wants to expand and upgrade its facilities and start an endowment.

It also plans to hold strategy sessions for activists to discuss major issues facing the South and what steps can be taken to organize and train people to cope with today's problems. It will expand some sorely needed activities, including an innovative project that trains interpreters to work with immigrants, longtime residents, and others on social-justice issues.

A goal of \$5-million for a capital campaign doesn't seem like a lot. But for the Highlander center the amount is huge.

In 2007 the center's operating budget was \$950,508. It is expected to reach \$1.2-million in 2009. Financing comes from relatively modest grants from a few large foundations and many very small individual contributions. Last year, the largest donation from an individual was \$15,000.

Today the center has 13 full-time staff members and a few part-time employees. It is hard to believe that such a small operating budget can sustain a strong professional staff and carry out the rest of its work. The budget is truly lean and mean, a real reflection of "more bang for the buck." But it is also a reflection of the indifference of foundations and wealthy Americans.

The Highlander center is one of the great grass-roots organizations of our time, an institution that has been at the heart of many of the social movements of the past 75 years. Its vision remains untarnished, and its accomplishments are unmatched by all but perhaps a few nonprofit organizations in the country. Its leaders are underpaid and overworked, serving the public because they believe so passionately in the mission of social justice.

Understandably, Highlander has made many enemies over the years. But it is inexcusable that today it is largely ignored by its friends and allies among foundations and progressive individual donors.

Where are the progressive individuals who give thousands or even hundreds of millions of dollars to arts institutions? Why won't they support an organization that has been in the trenches fighting their battles for social change?

Where are all those foundations that support social- and economic-justice groups and say they want all of their grants to make a difference?

Highlander needs a relatively small amount. Will donors have the intelligence and decency to respond to this appeal?

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