

Despite its successes, however, IRCO is still struggling to attract funding from Oregon’s individual donors and foundation community. A few years ago, IRCO moved into a converted lumberyard east of I-205 in Portland (an area that has a high population of refugee and otherwise socioeconomically deprived populations). While it did receive foundation support to purchase and convert the facility, it also went door to door collecting from former and current clients, asking for anything that could be spared toward the cause. Almost all gave a few dollars happily and gratefully. Regular financial support from its clients is necessarily small, however, and rates of giving to communities of color by foundations is lower than it should be. In IRCO’s case, funding is further complicated because the organization works broadly and does not target a culturally specific community. Djimet explains: “We’re not where we want to be yet in terms of our relationships with foundations. Not too many grantmakers know about issues in the refugee community, and if they don’t know the communities, they struggle to help them,” Djimet explains.

What is unique about IRCO is that it employs staff from over thirty distinct ethnic groups who speak over fifty languages, which means that those receiving help are often receiving it from within their community. IRCO’s services are adaptable and tailored precisely because of this—which also means that the organization has a nuanced knowledge of how best to direct a funder’s aid. “We can help link donors to those who most need help,” Djimet says. “IRCO’s population is among Oregon’s most vulnerable, but we have a lot of hope and expertise. Our community’s needs are growing, and we need help making our voices heard.” Lee agrees, pleading for “more foundations and individual donors to get out of their offices and out into the community.” What IRCO is doing makes sense for us all, he adds. “Whether we’re looking at immigrants or refugees, I think that as a nation of immigrants, they may be immigrants today but they’ll be citizens tomorrow. If we don’t address these issues intentionally, then we’re just doing it the hard way.”



Five Burmese refugee youth pose after performing a traditional dance at an IRCO celebration. Photo by Sabrina Biffer. Courtesy IRCO.

THE CENTER FOR INTERCULTURAL ORGANIZING (CIO): MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY BUILDING

The Center for Intercultural Organizing (CIO), originally created by immigrants and refugees to counter widespread anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11, is taking a different approach to similar issues and communities. Kayse Jama, a Somali refugee and the poetic and genial co-founder of CIO, tells the story of the organization’s inception. After he fled Somalia and eventually came to Portland, he began working as a youth advocate in a social service agency.

It was an awakening for him: “I realized that the organizations doing peace work here were mainly white and that I was the only person of color in the crowd. It seemed like there was a lack of racial and ethnic collaboration within our city.”

But it took two other incidents to trigger CIO’s founding. “The first was when, in 2002, Portland authorities arrested Sheik Mohammed Abdirahman Kariye, a prominent religious leader of Oregon’s Somali communities, on a false terrorism charge. To see their spiritual leader arrested shook the Somalian refugee community to its foundation with its unfairness,” Kayse says. A second incident occurred shortly thereafter. Kayse had been helping African women’s groups establish their own community organizations, and during one meeting he asked them what was happening on the streets of Portland. “When I’m in a suit, people can’t tell I’m a Muslim,” Kayse explains. “But Muslim women are much more visible. One woman told a story about how she’d had trash thrown at her out a window and had been called ‘Osama.’ She was laughing about this, but I was horrified, and I realized that even though I was the closest person to them, even *I* didn’t know what they were experiencing. Something had to be done.”

Kayse decided to organize a public discussion forum, and he contacted Stephanie Stephens, a communications specialist for the City Club, for some messaging and marketing help. They have since married and both of them played central roles in CIO’s development. Since its founding, CIO has grown from a community organizing group opposed to the profiling of Muslims to a nonprofit that seeks to build power in immigrant and refugee communities through community education, policy advocacy, intergenerational leadership development, and organizing and mobilizing.

Although its constituent communities overlap in both demographics and needs, CIO’s model is substantially different from IRCO’s, which places a higher priority on the provision of human services. CIO does provide some material services, particularly support for asylum seekers—those who are as yet undocumented, unlike those already granted asylum or refugee status. However, CIO’s main focus is on political advocacy and on qualitative community-building. “We help them find a sense of home,” Stephanie says. “The immigration experience is what brings people together. There are a lot of culturally specific ethnic organizations around that are doing good work and that are much-needed, but there was little movement around cross-cultural organizing and there was no one holding those deep conversations



CIO’s 2011 Legislative Action Day.
Courtesy the Center for Intercultural Organizing.



Mayoral Forum with Portland mayor Charlie Hales. Photo by Jules Garza. Courtesy CIO.

on politics, religion, worldview, etc., which have to happen for a multicultural society to become genuinely tolerant and interactive.”

CIO has over a thousand members now, hailing from more than seventy countries. Its members have joined with other coalitions and have helped achieve a number of landmark legislative victories, including tuition equity for all of Oregon’s students, ending Section 8 discrimination, and improving cultural competency in health care. CIO has engaged with community members to build the organizing skills needed to mobilize and bring about positive social changes and has led leadership training programs intended to build up lasting relationships between refugee, immigrant, and existing communities of color in Oregon.

All members either pay financial dues to help with operational and salary expenses for CIO’s six employees, or they volunteer their time. “Eighty percent of our members choose labor equity, so we have tens of thousands of hours of labor a year—we calculated it at \$1.2 million worth of volunteer labor,” Stephanie says proudly. The quantity of volunteer support means that CIO’s reach extends far beyond the capacity of its six-person staff. “The majority of our actual dollars are from foundations or government,” she explains. “We don’t really have high donors who are members”—there are less than five people who give over \$1,000. “Since most members of our community are stretched thin just trying to eke out a living, the actual hours that people are giving are a huge part of our story.” With the strength of its volunteer corps, CIO managed to grow its budget during the recent recession while other nonprofits were struggling to stay afloat, and its large number of members attests to its success.

Out of a disparate and often traumatized group of people, CIO has fostered a sense of community and unity while pushing for progressive changes that will further empower its members. “Multiethnic organizing is how democracy gets renewed, how we incorporate the opinions of all people, ranging from the oldest Native inhabitants to the most recent immigrants,” Kayse believes. “If the notion of this young country is about building democracy and good governance for our community, and if we’re looking forward to an increasingly multiracial, multicultural future, then we need to find out how to build that infrastructure from the bottom up.”

That commitment to tolerance, dialogue, and multiculturalism as a *norm* is what drew Baher Butti, the director of the Iraqi Society of Oregon and CIO’s board chair, to the organization. “I came from Iraq as a refugee in 2007,” he says. “I was [a psychiatrist and] an activist in Iraq, and when I fled, I needed a place to restart, a place to find myself again. I met Kayse while working with Middle Easterners and Iraqis here, and I liked it that while they supported me in founding an Iraqi group, they were really about the *intercultural* aspect.” Many refugee and immigrant communities are too small to be visible or effective on their own, he says. “And if we keep separating between the mainstream and the margins, it’s not going to work. America’s social structure is changing and it is going to be multicultural. [CIO] is a place that creates a multicultural identity so that you don’t have to keep this dichotomy of one or the other, mainstream or margins, American or Iraqi. You can be both: the way to resolve these conflicts is to advocate for a multicultural society.”

Bringing people together is CIO’s specialty. Its model of intercultural tolerance bodes well for Oregon’s future, but it also helps its members in the present to find common ground with others who, like themselves, have been uprooted. The activism is empowering, but so are the moments of intersection. “People come to us for a sense of community, a sense of a new home,” Kayse says. “Members tell me that they feel a sense of place and belonging here. It helps them regain what they’ve lost.”

INCIGHT: UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

When they were undergraduates at the University of Portland, Vail Horton, Scott Hatley, and Jerry Carleton were inseparable. Scott, who uses a motorized wheelchair, and Jerry, who is able-bodied, used to do a *Titanic* routine, flying around campus with Jerry perched on the back of Scott’s wheelchair, arms outstretched, crowing “I’m the king of the world!” One day Vail, who was born without legs and used crutches to get around, was told by his doctor that the crutches were damaging his shoulders and that he should begin