

## Sowing Seeds of Change in Columbus, Ohio

---

B a s e d o n a n I n t e r v i e w w i t h P h i l C a s s

A deep yearning for fellowship, education, and community service were the DNA materials that gave rise to a county medical society 113 years ago in Columbus, Ohio. In the early years, the physician members of the medical society were the backbone of massive community-wide voluntary efforts to vaccinate the citizenry against smallpox and polio. In more modern times, the physicians' entrepreneurial spirit gave rise to the formation of a physician-owned health insurance company, whose subsequent sale helped endow one of the largest medical society affiliated health foundations in the United States—the Columbus Medical Association Foundation.

It is the nature of DNA to pass on its strengths from generation to generation, and thus the current Foundation possesses much of the DNA material from the society's early founders. Through its leadership and funding, the Foundation has stimulated the development of a community organization solely dedicated to the issues of the uninsured. Through this organization, a network of 660 physicians volunteer their services for the uninsured, with support from hospitals, other foundations, and city and county governments.

Foundation CEO Phil Cass has been coming to the Shambhala Institute's Summer Programs since 2001, bringing back tools and deep-level learning to this already-fertile ground for social innovation. The result has been a significant culture shift within the organization, as well as the beginnings of a movement towards healthcare reform and a culture of dialogue across the city.

**Snapshot 1:** In March 2005 a group of 36 community leaders who spanned sectors and generations spent three full days with Toke Moeller, learning the Art of Hosting Conversations that are both strategic and meaningful. Each of these leaders took this seed back to their home organization. When the group reconvened in October, each person told a story of how that seed had begun to germinate in their work and life, in some cases dramatically. Many are now inspired to go forward with a "level 2" training, and to host a community gathering modeled after the Institute's Global Village Square. One member, Matt Habash, who is both the President of the Columbus City Council and Executive Director of the Mid-Ohio Food Bank, will apply these skills to convene a community dialogue around hunger.

"A network of 660 physicians volunteer their services for the uninsured."

**Snapshot 2:** In the first week of November 2005, Adam Kahane and a team from Generon Consulting conducted a feasibility study in Columbus, to see whether the community was ready to embark on a change process around healthcare. Phil invited Generon to do this work after experiencing the Change Lab at the Institute last June. Generon conducted more than 50 interviews with diverse stakeholders, and then clustered what they were hearing in these "community voices" into four quadrants: more free clinics and volunteerism ("safety-net-plus"), a safe and neutral forum where the rules can be renegotiated ("negotiating table"), education to transform the views of individuals and systems ("school of innovation"), and a community-wide change process in which people would co-create a new approach to healthcare ("new ground").

"At some point we realized that the Art of Hosting was the 'operating system' we would use for taking Change Lab work out into the community."

**Snapshot 3:** A plan was in place to share the findings of these interviews with the interviewees, their guests, and Trustee members—85 people in all—that same week. Instead it became clear that this was not the right time. Phil recalls, “Both Adam [Kahane] and Toke [Moeller] were in town, and a group of us were holding both the Change Lab and the Art of Hosting, without any clear idea of how they might intersect. There was no tension between these two—it was just a big question mark. That week we knew we were living at the bottom of the U [the reflective, pre-clarity stage of the U-process, out of which new insight and action steps can emerge]. At some point we realized that the Art of Hosting was the ‘operating system’ we would use for taking Change Lab work out into the community. We wanted to live those principles, which work with the deeper patterns of community conversation and change, while developing our own capacity along the way. So we rescheduled the report-out for December. The design for that event has already begun.”

The Columbus story is a living illustration of how different models and tools for system-wide change can be applied in a fluid way, once leaders have assimilated the underlying patterns and principles. This story also documents an experiment in “just enough intervention”—in using external consultants to support community capacity-building. And it shows how structured implementation can be balanced with “letting come”—allowing the change process to evolve in response to an emerging future that comes into view as a community begins to connect to its history, its strengths, and what it cares about most.