Newsletter of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning Project

Learning Changes

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Photo Courtesy of Laura Berman/FoodShare

Welcome to Learning Changes

by Sharon Simpson

Photo courtesy Labour Community Services

Welcome to your first edition of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project newsletter.

Newsletters have long been used as a grassroots tool for information sharing and knowledge brokering. In keeping with that tradition, we in the APCOL project have chosen to incorporate a newsletter as a means of knowledge mobilization and communication. We want to disseminate the what, why, when, who, and how of this action research project. So here goes...

WHAT IS APCOL?

The APCOL project aims to explore and strengthen:

- Grassroots community organizing work to combat poverty
- Popular education and informal learning as supports for combating poverty through activist development and campaigns
- Implementation of low-cost, accessible communication tools to disseminate what is learned.

This five year research project (2009-2014) is being funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) under its Community University Research Alliance (CURA) program

WHO WILL BE WORKING ON THE APCOL PROJECT?

This Toronto-based project is a collaboration between university and community organizations/groups. It is co-led by researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto and Labour Community Services. Its steering committee consists of representatives from a number of community organizations/groups and other Toronto area universities and colleges.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCH BE CONDUCTED?

The APCOL project is using engaged action research as well as city-wide surveying techniques in partnership with community groups.

Agreements have been reached between APCOL and the following to study work they have been doing to combat poverty: Food Share Toronto, Social Planning Toronto, Toronto and York Region Labour Council, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), George Brown College, Ryerson University, and York University. ⌘

Sharon Simpson is Special Projects Coordinator for Labour Community Services, and community co-leader of the APCOL project.

FoodShare Toronto:
Building Community From the Ground Up

by Phung Lam

It was a rainy Friday afternoon when I set foot in the FoodShare building located on 90 Croatia St. in the heart of downtown Toronto. Coming to the interview at the end of a work week, I was not expecting to see many people or much momentum around the building. To my surprise, there were several FoodShare members and kitchen staff working hard at their stations. A young intern greeted me with a friendly smile at the reception desk. As I waited for Ravenna in the office, the intern expressed her enthusiasm and love for working at this organization. After a few minutes of waiting, the intern walked me to Ravenna's office to begin our interview.

Ravenna Barker is the Community Food Program Manager at FoodShare. She was a crucial part of the development of the project between APCOL and FoodShare at the beginning; since that time, her role has evolved into more of a supportive one. Currently, she supervises Sarosh Anwar who is implementing the case study project.

As the first of ten case studies with APCOL, FoodShare will help to inform future case studies. The main question that both parties are asking is what brings people into activism and what sustains them. To answer these questions FoodShare will reflect on its work in low income communities with community gardens, food markets, and community kitchens.

When asked about where FoodShare fits in on the continuum of the food security movement- where at one end, there are expensive organics and heirloom varieties, and at the other end, there are people just trying to meet their basic needs, Ravenna had a very specific idea of FoodShare's values. Most important is healthy food. Next is affordability, followed by: culturally appropriate, locally grown, fair trade, and sustainably produced. To Ravenna, the latter two values are still arguable and they both might be at the same level.

During these tough economic times, Ravenna notes that people are finding it even harder to make ends meet and put food on the table. One of the biggest challenges whenever someone is trying to make healthy food choices is the affordability factor. Ravenna acknowledges that buying organic foods, as a means to better our bodies and our world, does come with a higher price tag than buying processed foods. For many people who juggle two or three jobs while trying to spend quality time with their families- the trick is to strike a balance. This is something that "faces

all of us...and it's harder when you don't have the resources," said Ravenna.

This is why FoodShare is advocating for a Minister of Food Security- a position that would bridge the gap between food access- currently, a responsibility of the Ministry of Health, and the increasing cost of food. In addition, FoodShare is also advocating for monthly food vouchers for everybody. Their approach has always been to do universal programming.

Photo courtesy of Laura Berman/FoodShare

The idea of food vouchers is not novel to our neighbours to the south. In the U.S., there's the Women, Infant and Children's program (WIC) which has a food voucher for farmers' markets that is working quite well. "We'd love to build on the success of that program and find something that's a made in Ontario solution or made in Canada solution," said Ravenna.

Unfortunately, there are "perverse subsidies" that exist in the food system. In this aspect, Ravenna believes that Canada is not as bad as the United States. Their subsidies are going towards foods that need to be processed rather than into sustainable growing. As an organization, FoodShare's focus has always been on fresh fruits and vegetables and on improving health.

An idea that has gained momentum in the food moment is that of food sovereignty. The idea behind food sovereignty is to give people control of the food system so that they can make choices about how food is produced, distributed, cooked and eaten. Fundamental to this movement, according to Ravenna, is to build communities. "For us, working just on an individual basis is not going to transform the food system. It's only through people working together that transformation is going to happen."

Building capacity, both on an individual level as well as on the community level, is

"People are more fit, they are more articulate, and they are more aware of food, poverty, and empowerment issues. Most importantly, we see lots of people's emerging leadership."

a crucial part of what FoodShare does. For example, the organization offers direct training for a variety of projects and facilitates discussions so that people can become aware of their own capacities. This is one avenue that FoodShare has created to give people more opportunities to be an active part of their communities.

These responsibilities are shared by Community Animators- whose job is to go to places, particularly low income neighbourhoods, to help those who want to start programs or food projects get started. They will work with that community group to develop the vision for the project and gather the resources needed to make the project successful. Once the projects are up and running, Community Animators provide ongoing support, advice, and consultation.

Amongst those who become involved with FoodShare, Ravenna recognizes that many already have, on some level, an innate sense of leadership in them. This is why it is even more important for the organization to reach out to those who are disengaged. They are always trying to find ways to meet the needs of a diverse group of people. "Part of what we do is connect to local organizations anywhere we work. So, we're not just out there, a voice in Scarborough or North York, but we come in usually through other community organizations," said Ravenna.

She adds that the organization is conscious of their limitations- not only with language barriers or cultural barriers- but technological ones as well. "We have a website and a Facebook page, but that's really a one way communication. A lot of what we do is around the telephone hotline so if you want to call that a new technology, we could!"

For those who are able to get involved with FoodShare programs, the personal transformation is profound. "People are more fit, they are more articulate, and they are more aware of food, poverty, and empowerment issues. Most importantly, we see lots of people's emerging leadership. They have that latent leadership there and they're just given the opportunity to grow."

I asked Ravenna what she would like to see happen as a result of the APCOL partnership. "I would like to see a group of community leaders that we work with move into a new level of leadership. I hope they become more able to speak on behalf of the issues that are important to their lives and close to their hearts in a much more powerful way. Then they will be capable of training other people and creating the kind of transformation that we as animators seek. And I'd like

"Food as a community organizing tool ... [is] actually around hope and excitement rather than need and sadness."

to see other cities across the country learn from us as well."

For those who are interested in getting involved in food security issues, Ravenna has this piece of advice for you: start by reading Michael Pollan's book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma". This is a great introduction to the many complexities of food security issues. Then get involved with food security issues for the excitement around it. "People are drawn to this because they see possibility. That's one of the things that I love so much about food as a community organizing tool. It's actually around hope and excitement rather than need and sadness or sense of things not going well. So often, people are drawn to food because they can envision the garden or they can envision the market and they're really excited about the beautiful food they'll get...Coming to things out of a sense of excitement really works much better."

For more information on FoodShare Toronto, please visit:
http://www.foodshare.net/index.htm

Phung Lam is a graduate student in Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. As an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo, her research work was on public housing in the Regent Park community. Currently, Phung is doing research on teaching Junior/Intermediate Geography through the lens of social justice. ⌘

Spotlight on: Deena Ladd

by Melissa Fong

Deena Ladd of the Workers' Action Centre (WAC) has been using popular education as a technique to advocate with workers for two decades. Naturally, Deena is one of the first people the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project approached, to help identify key ways in which anti-poverty organizations engage their members. My interview with Deena illuminated the importance of reciprocity and learning circles to sustaining a vibrant activist organization.

Deena's day consists of coordinating all activities of WAC and this is no easy feat considering the range of activities the organization undertakes. The organization has worked to improve wages and working conditions for workers of colour, low-wage workers and non-status workers. WAC tries to connect with workers facing violations of their rights on the job by providing educational

workshops, practical information on what to do as well as connecting with people through various community organizations.

WAC believes that the people they work with bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the table. Deena explains, "We start from that point – workers' experiences on the job, What has that taught them? What changes do they think are needed? What strategies would work to connect with others facing the same issues? We build on their expertise, raise awareness of social justice, the root causes of the systemic inequities we are facing and facilitate conversations on making change."

This approach is exemplified by the way workers connect with WAC through the Workers' Rights Phone Line. The Centre operates a hotline in six languages where people can phone to ask about a problem. WAC workers ask callers to come to an information session. At that session WAC starts off the discussion with people's experiences at work and questions they have about their rights.

"Through the process of finding out what information people have, we are able to connect people's experience to broader issues, such as the lack of enforcement of basic laws, the lack of protection for temporary or contract workers, or just weak labour laws. We have discussions about why this is happening and the need for change," Deena says.

Many people sign up to be a member of WAC at the end of the information session to gain greater involvement in the organization. Through these sessions, WAC aims to move from people's individual problems towards empowering workers to fight for change.

Photo Courtesy of the City of Toronto

"When people become members we invite them to Organizing Meetings where workers become involved in broader organizing and contribute to campaign development. This gives them an opportunity to be a part of a learning process, supporting workers to participate in politicized actions that give participants the courage to fight for their rights."

The majority of WAC leadership consists of people who made that first call because of an individual violation they experienced. Their development into activism demonstrates the reciprocal relationship WAC develops with its members: people may come to the organization wanting a "fix" to their problem, but through organizing and learning about workers' rights issues they become engaged as long-term members.

One of the goals of WAC is to help members develop into popular educators themselves so that they may organize and lead subsequent mobilizations.

Outreach, skills training, political education and workshops help members learn how to frame issues, hone in on key messages, and develop an understanding of what changes are needed to improve wages and working conditions. WAC is an advocacy group, not a charity. It stresses the need for its members to commit to goals of social justice and human rights and, most instrumentally to their success to collectively organize, developing a systemic understanding of individual problems.

Accessibility to participating in WAC is increased by ensuring it is multi-lingual and covers a wide geography, and having weekly info sessions in two locations in the GTA. However, WAC struggles, like many social justice organizations, to maintain participation as it knows that the people who are most at risk of precarious work situations have the most hardship in attending meetings and finding time to participate.

To build the vibrant membership it currently has, it incorporates buddy systems, partnerships that keep members up to date, and tries to develop relationships and interpersonal support through the organizing process.

Deena is one of six staff at the WAC. It is impressive to see organizing committees not only in Downtown Toronto, but also in Scarborough, and the development of a third committee in North York. WAC developed from the coming-together of a group of participants from a CURA-funded research project, co-led by Deena, in search of solutions to the precarious work situations they were experiencing. "When the research was completed, participants wanted to organize and have an organization that represented them," said Deena.

The APCOL project can be inspired by the model of the Workers' Action Centre which successfully utilizes popular education and empowers members to mobilize. Our project is sure to be successful if we can emulate WAC's ability to develop momentum for the anti-poverty movement.

For more information about the Workers' Action Centre please visit:
http://www.workersactioncentre.org

Melissa Fong is a graduate student in Adult Education & Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Her current research is on the topic of anti-poverty social movements and settlement houses in Canada. Melissa also writes for the Ryerson Free Press *and* rabble.ca. ⌘

Filling Holes: Where APCOL Fits Into Current Research

by Peter Sawchuk and Sharon Simpson

Our APCOL project is using action research to fill in several important gaps in the existing resources on anti-poverty activity. By doing this, we can deepen and widen our ability to understand ways in which activists and communities take on the challenges of poverty in Toronto and elsewhere.

There is no shortage of excellent research on poverty and anti-poverty in today's societies. Research from around the globe as well as right here in Canada has looked at the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. It has explored who is affected most deeply by poverty. It has investigated how poverty emerges, and how citizens can self-organize, struggle and create positive change in their communities and economies. There is survey style research that has looked at these issues on a broad scale. And, there are also a great number of detailed studies of individual instances of people organizing and responding to challenges of one type or another. In setting the research goals of the APCOL project we carefully reviewed this research for ideas that were not yet fully understood and applied.

Anti-Poverty Action Research: The study of anti-poverty action by participant-researchers involved in campaigns themselves.

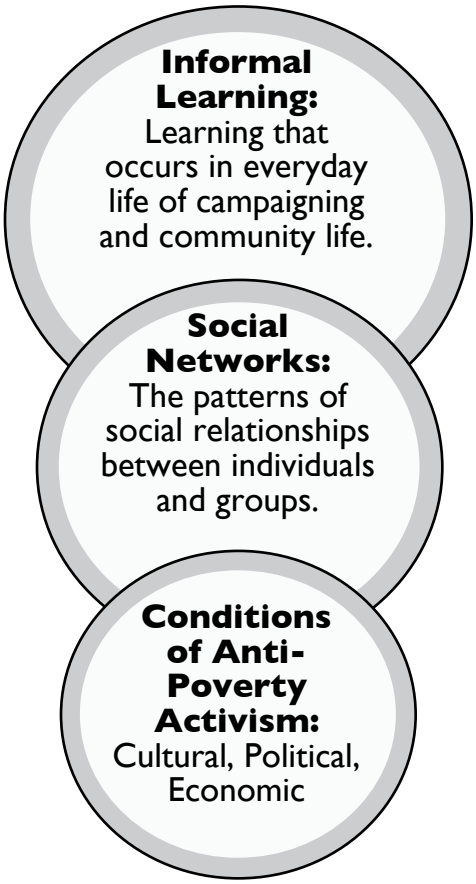
The first gap we found is perhaps so basic that researchers do not give it a second thought. Research has seldom if ever looked closely at how social changes ultimately depend upon how people – individually and collectively – undergo change themselves, or *learn*. In fact, very few researchers have combined studies of social movement development and anti-poverty action with an exploration of *activist learning and development*. According to the research, learning just seems to happen. Yet we know, as organizers, activists and participants that between organizing for change and actually bringing change about people respond in very different ways. How is it, the APCOL project asks, that when faced with apparently similar conditions people respond so differently? This, we think, is a matter of different types of learning.

Popular Education: Planned educational efforts within organized campaigns that build in a systematic way from community members' experience.

A second gap that was revealed in our review of research was that studies often focused on a single issue (e.g. housing, school completion, living wage, health/nutrition) rather than seeing these as inter-linked in a broader perspective on poverty and anti-poverty action. Our response was to look at how these are (or could be) related to each other as a comprehensive effort undertaken across an entire metropolitan area.

A third gap we identified was that survey and focused case study research were seldom combined to answer questions. Each of these research methods has its own unique strengths. Survey research allows us to see the effects of broader conditions and patterns of activity. Detailed studies of individual campaigns on the other hand help us see in greater detail how individuals and groups are seeking to bring about positive changes. In response to this, the APCOL project is using both large-scale surveying of anti-poverty action/conditions combined with a series of eight detailed case studies. All of these are used within a framework of 'action research'.

The fourth and final gap in the research is that it usually explores a small number of isolated factors affecting the organizing process. Part of the problem here is that individual researchers work on the basis of a specific field or research discipline. Yet the boundaries between academic disciplines often hinder rather than help us take on real-world social problems. We believe that research that asks and answers questions across different research fields has an important role to play. For this reason, the APCOL project has brought together researchers from a variety of academic disciplines – social movement studies, sociology, political science, political economy, policy studies, labour studies, anti-racism, feminist studies and educational studies – in order to ask and answer important questions about the nature of poverty, anti-poverty and activism.



The combination of research ideas is an important strength of the APCOL approach. The following are the four sets of research ideas at the centre of our collective efforts.

IDEA 1 – POPULAR EDUCATION/INFORMAL LEARNING

Very little detailed analysis of how learning takes place in anti-poverty campaigns is found in the research literature to date. The APCOL project will focus on individual and collective learning processes. Specifically we investigate *popular education* efforts which can be used to develop activists and campaigns. We also investigate *informal learning* efforts by activists, community participants and those in the community that may not be actively participating in a campaign.

IDEA 2 – SOCIAL NETWORKS

Every campaign or effort at social change depends on *social networks,* whether this involves friends, family, or other campaign participants. These social networks are complex and overlapping. Social networks research is well developed in relation to social change efforts of many different kinds. The APCOL project will link social network research to understanding how people come to participate in campaigns with specific learning outcomes for seasoned, emerging and potential participants.

IDEA 3 – CONDITIONS OF ACTIVISM

Both learning processes and social networks, of course, take place within *specific conditions*. These conditions play a fundamental role in defining strategy, and influence the success or failure of organizing efforts. How is campaign success or failure influenced by cultural differences; economic and local labour market conditions; local, municipal, provincial and even national political conditions? While many previous studies have highlighted the role of one set of conditions or another, few combine them.

IDEA 4 – EQUITY & BIOGRAPHY

Who becomes engaged in different forms of anti-poverty campaigns? How does who they are affect their participation and learning? And, how do their different social networks and conditions shape who becomes an activist or leader, and who remains excluded from participation?

Research on learning in anti-poverty campaigns and social movement development has rarely addressed such questions together.

Anti-poverty activity itself often shows very uneven attention to such matters, and in so doing can result in exclusions. The APCOL project undertakes the study of equity, inequity and biography within anti-poverty organizing and activist development as a matter of learning, un-learning and breaking down barriers. ⌘

Peter Sawchuk teaches in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. With David Livingstone, he is academic co-leader of the APCOL project.

What's next

by D'Arcy Martin

Photo Courtesy of OISE

Through the fall and winter 2009-2010, the project's in-depth interviewing and recording will concentrate in two locations – Foodshare and the community organizations in Kingston-Galloway, while also completing a historical review of the campaign for a $10 Minimum Wage in Toronto. The following year, we plan to add two more locations, to do a background survey on all four locations, and to have our first full-scale knowledge exchange among the project participants in all locations. Whew!

SUPPORT FOR ORGANIZING

Community activists will co-design and help to carry out the research in each of the campaigns, guided by a coordinating community partner and an academic researcher. Participatory action research methods will ensure not only that the most relevant data are produced for the study, but that opportunities are created at the grassroots level to support and enhance innovative organizing strategies. Among these opportunities will be the support of a network of organizations and groups, which has been a key attraction for participating community researchers and activists.

COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY PARTNERS

As well as the case studies, APCOL community partners include the Black Action Defense Committee, Chinese-Canadian National Congress (Toronto chapter), Social Planning Toronto, United Way Canada, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and others. These community groups will be joined by researchers from Ryerson University, York University, George Brown College, and the University of Toronto. Together, the representatives of these organizations and institutions have a wealth of experience both in conducting anti-poverty, urban, and community research, and in leading community initiatives.

MULTIPLE RESEARCH ANGLES

Our approach is to balance the qualitative in-depth material with some analysis of the social and political environment, set against a backdrop of quantitative survey results. From these multiple angles, a picture should start to emerge of the diverse processes by which people learn to become engaged in anti-poverty community action, and to sustain their engagement over time. By the end of the second year, 2010-2011, we hope that anti-poverty networks will have been strengthened by our work, and that we will have learned enough to contribute directly to the advocacy work around social and economic inequality.

TOOLS FOR ACTION

Over the five year period of this project, we will continue filling in more details in the portrait of learning for social and economic justice. Increasingly in the second half of our work, the public education and advocacy part of our participatory action research will

come to the fore. By the end of this initiative, we hope to have a richer understanding and recognition of the knowledge and skills participants have developed and to have influenced the community services provided to support that learning.

SHARING RESULTS

APCOL has ambitious plans to communicate the results of the study, reaching all the way from the grassroots to national and international gatherings. These include:

- Speaker series in Toronto neighbourhoods as well as at college and university campuses;
- A newsletter;
- Hosting two conferences;
- Scholarly works including peer-reviewed papers to be presented at national or international conferences, and for publication; and,
- Engagement with all levels of government on policy issues stemming from the research. ⌘

D'Arcy Martin is an activist educator and coordinator of the APCOL project.

Housing Politics

By Yutaka Dirks and the Housing Network of Ontario (HNO)

On, September 30th, the final official public affordable housing strategy consultation was held in Thunder Bay. Low-income tenants, agencies, social housing advocates and others closed out the round of official public consultation with calls for a bold long-term affordable housing strategy which meaningfully addresses the deep housing needs in Ontario.

But the official consultation meetings are not the end of HNO's work, and there are many opportunities to build the movement for affordable housing.

On Tuesday, November 3rd, members of HNO met with Minister of Housing Jim Watson to press for a comprehensive, fully-funded housing strategy with bold targets. We emphasized that the plan must ensure Ontarians can live poverty-free and with dignity in housing that is stable, adequate, equitably accessible and affordable. Watson promised that the long-term affordable housing strategy would be released by June 2010.

THE HNO PROPOSAL

On Monday, November 16, HNO released *Communities Speak: A Summary of the 2009 Provincial Housing Consultations*. The report reflects government-led consultations held between June and November with housing providers, tenants, agency staff, private landlords, and low-income people in housing need. Ontarians were clear: we need a comprehensive, long-term affordable housing strategy with bold targets to improve the housing situation of low-income Ontarians.

The report summarizes core conclusions of the consultations with 40 recommendations

for the provincial government to enact. You can view the report by visiting: http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/communities-speak. It is available in both English and French and is downloadable as a pdf.

Photo: G. de Montmollin

MAKE A WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO THE PROVINCIAL CONSULTATION

At our meeting with Minister Watson we learned that while many hundreds of people have participated in the consultations, he has not received many formal written submissions. It is imperative that he hear from you – both because the long-term affordable housing strategy must be responsive to community needs, but also to underscore that housing is a priority in every community.

If you haven't done so already, please make a written submission to the Provincial consultation process, highlighting the housing needs and solutions in your community.

Written submissions are being accepted until December 31, 2009. The mailing address is Housing Policy Branch, 14th Floor, 777 Bay St., Toronto ON M5G 2E5.

HNO has created an on-line hub at http://stableandaffordable.com/ that is regularly being updated with the latest news, reports from community meetings, tips for actions and plenty of other resources.

Also on the HNO web site:

- tell us your housing story (http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/tell-us-your-story-0);
- find plenty of helpful resources (http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/helpful-resources);
- tell us what's happening in your community (http://www.stableandaffordable.com/content/whats-happening-your-community)

and you will find out what is happening in other places and learn more about the Housing Network of Ontario. ⌘

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Further Readings of Interest

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APCOL Speaker Series

by Gabrielle de Montmollin

The APCOL Speaker Series was inaugurated on September 17 by Wade Rathke, co-founder of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Rathke was ACORN's chief organizer from its founding in 1970 until 2008. He is the publisher and editor-in-chief of *Social Policy*, a quarterly magazine for scholars and activists, and the author of two recently published books. Accompanied by Josh Stuart from ACORN's Toronto office and introduced by Peter Sawchuk (OISE) and Stephanie Ross (York University) Rathke spoke about the many changes in approaches to community organizing which have taken place over the span of his career. He stressed the importance of adapting to increasingly hostile political environments and keeping current with new technologies. "The [APCOL] project is fascinating and it will be interesting to see how it progresses and what conclusions it draws over the years, but right now it was interesting for the discussion it allowed about organizing and the challenges before us", wrote Rathke looking back on the event. ⌘

Gabrielle de Montmollin is administrative and communications assistant of the APCOL project.

Keeping in Touch

Members of the APCOL project are committed to communicating with groups and individuals interested in issues and campaigns involving Nutrition and Food Security, Housing, School Completion, and Jobs/Living Wages. If you would like to be part of this exchange of information please send an email to info@apcol.ca and we will add you to our electronic listserv.

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