



**Interview of Caroline Murray**  
**Organizing Director, Rebuild the Dream and**  
**former Executive Director, Alliance to Develop Power / ADP, Massachusetts.**

Interviewed by Steve Dubb, Research Director, The Democracy Collaborative  
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*Caroline Murray was Executive Director of the ADP (Alliance to Develop Power) from 1993 to 2011. Headquartered in Springfield, Massachusetts, ADP has created \$80 million in community-owned enterprises, which employ 125 people in living wage jobs. Murray recently left ADP to become Organizing Director of Rebuild the Dream.*

**Could you explain how you came to be involved with community organizing and what inspired you to become a community organizer?**

I grew up in the 1970s and graduated from high school in 1983. My family experienced an interesting dynamic where our class identity shifted a number of times, due to marriage, divorce, foreclosure and bankruptcy. I went from hanging out at the country club pool to relying on food stamps and living with extended family. But my mother was a strong willed entrepreneur with a keen sense for business that got us through. So I grew up knowing that something was very, very wrong with how our economy worked. I understood from a very young age how fragile the middle class was.

When I graduated from high school, I went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, this of course was when an education at a State University was still relatively affordable and Pell Grants were readily available for low-income students like me. I became involved in student organizing, the anti-apartheid movement, and was elected to student government. And there I learned there was a career called “community organizing.” For me, working in organizing and community economic development – people power and economic power -- is the continuation of my life and my life’s work and has become my calling.

**Could you talk about how you got involved in ADP and how it has developed as an organization over time?**

After working in electoral politics for a number of years and organizing with the welfare reform movement, I went to work as the Executive Director of ADP in 1993. At that time, it was a very small nonprofit advocacy organization, but I had a vision of creating a new kind of membership-based organization that was rooted in building power. At that time, ADP was a single-issue organization and was part of an incredibly important national fight to save hundreds of thousands of families from displacement because of laws that allowed private developers to convert their publicly financed affordable apartment complexes to market rate, or condos, or tear them down

and put up a strip mall and make windfall profits. ADP was a project of the NLIHC and part of a national campaign to win new federal legislation that would stop these landlords from profiting off the backs of low and moderate income tenants and the tax payer while at the same time create new financing mechanisms to keep the housing permanently affordable.

While most of our allies around the country went on to find non-profit housing developers to purchase the apartment complexes -- we latched upon a novel idea that was actually being touted by Jack Kemp, Secretary of HUD – why not buy them ourselves as membership-based, democratically governed corporations? Here was an opportunity to convert ownership of the housing to the people who lived there and develop long-lasting leadership. We could keep it permanently affordable for generations to come. We could stop capital flight by controlling the money that flows in and out. And we could alter the relations of power between landlord and tenant.

I believed then and I still believe today that we need to think big – we need to stake our flag way out ahead – and be aspirational in our goals as we work towards truly transformational change. We need to do this among ourselves, with our neighbors, and in our society as a whole. Changing the dynamics of ownership and decision-making really became the foundation of my work.

### **Could you discuss the origins of how the first housing cooperative came about?**

The first buyout campaign took seven years to win and the others took about four. We also lost a few, including the apartment complex where I lived. My rent for a two-bedroom apartment went from \$568 a month to \$1,400 a month overnight. It was an intense period and we bought out about 1,200 units of housing, making it the largest block of tenant controlled housing in the United States. ADP members also saved about 4,000 more apartments as affordable by working with the existing landlord when we couldn't convince them to sell. It is far too complicated to get into the details of how a campaign like this works. But the most important thing to take away is the understanding that everyday people do extraordinary things every day. Of course, you also need resources, a strategic plan, tactics that make sense, a number cruncher, but nothing gets done without community leaders and community organizers who understand power.

You see the same thing at Occupy today. It is one thing to win policies and that of course is critically important. But what we really need to be thinking about is fundamental restructuring of the systems that perpetuate inequity. We need to be talking and taking action in order to reshape and change the dynamics of power.

We have an opportunity to create a new economy movement that is based on our values and bring economic power back into the hands of the people and community. Every day there are new cooperatives and community-owned businesses being created, expansions in the shareable and gifting economy, collaborative consumption, and more socially responsible entrepreneurs, -- everyday people know that the economy is out of whack and we are fixing it one business and one neighborhood at a time.

In my work, we did that with affordable housing complexes, worker owned businesses, food cooperatives, community centers, sharing, gifting, and training. All of these economic institutions came out of organizing campaigns and represented concrete improvements in the lives of the people and their communities and society as a whole. And they came out of the hearts and minds of people who were fighting everyday to create the world, as it should be. We want to own stuff too, not just fight people who own stuff.

And the beautiful thing is the work continues and will reflect the hearts and minds of a new generation of leaders. ADP continues to do amazing things, including addressing food insecurity and predatory lending with the creation of a community owned bodega that will sell fresh food grown by the community and provide non-predatory financial services like check cashing. That is revolutionary.

**How did ADP manage to forge the community economy it has helped create? Could you break down how ADP achieved some of its key objectives?**

The essence of community organizing is to work with people at the grassroots level to build power, identify the problems, and win solutions. There are methodologies for doing that, outreach and listen to the community, develop leaders, identify a campaign, do a power analysis, identify the decision maker, issue demands, wield power, negotiate and so on.

We created a model that takes that one step further. In other words, we wanted one outcome of a campaign to be the creation of a membership controlled alternative economic institution that would control wealth and assets. So when we organized tenants, rather than simply try to keep the rents affordable or fix the broken toilets, we would seek to purchase the property so the toilets would never break again and the rents would remain affordable for generations. And by converting major properties into tenant ownership then the community would control millions of dollars of real estate. You can use the surplus funds you control to benefit the commons. I always say, “The way you ask a question determines the answer.” And so, we started asking different questions. How do you meet an unmet need in the community? How do you capture a surplus and expand the commons?

I remember one of our first budgeting meetings after a successful buyout. We were reviewing the operating budget and got down to the landscaping line item. One of the members said, “why don't we pay ourselves to mow the lawn?” And it was like a lightening bolt hit. In that moment, all the questions changed and an infinite number of possibilities became clear. And so we decided to create a landscaping business. Then we added up all of the money the community now controlled through these large apartment complexes and met with the president of a local bank who we knew because he was a former political appointee of then-Governor Weld, a strong supporter of our work at that time. We told him we would move our money, millions of dollars in cash flow, into his bank if he financed the start up of our company. And we were off to the races.

At some point, we realized that we had a captive market and we could create a new “community economy” that served this captive market, filled unmet needs in the community – both in terms

of the services provided but also in terms of creating living wage jobs – and generated a surplus that could fund organizing. And so we created and expanded the businesses that served captive markets: i.e., landscaping, snow removal, painting, cleaning and construction. But it is important to note that these businesses also came out of or supported organizing campaigns. And so we organized workers on construction sites who were experiencing wage theft, created a worker center that filed wage and hour claims and won back millions of dollars that had been stolen from workers. At the same time, those workers founded the worker center and became leaders in the construction arm of the business.

Another great example is the work in the green economy. ADP joined a statewide campaign with the Green Justice Coalition to increase investments in energy efficiency, lower our dependence on fossil fuel, and ensure resources made it to the communities of color and low income communities that bear the brunt of environmental injustice and were suffering from the economic crisis long before the banks crashed. And so, groups all over Massachusetts went door knocking and created a new market for energy efficiency services while at the same time building power to win new policies. However, many energy efficiency jobs are low wage and have very high rates of on the job injury. So the campaign partnered with the Carpenters and the painters unions, in order to ensure the work was creating living wage jobs and to drive up wages in the overall market and improve the sector. But at ADP of course, a new business was created in the energy efficiency sector. And so a whole new base of leaders came into the organization, new relationships were built with partners, major policies were won at the state level and a new business was created that filled an unmet need and benefited the commons.

The bottom line is to build people power and economic power. I think of this work as creating the world as it should be and modeling what sustainability really is. It is living out what people call the triple bottom line and actually understanding that our actions can drive the economy rather than having the economy control us. And, as my mentor Julie Graham taught me, it means striving to achieve equilibrium – balance — in a community economy that is ever expanding and interconnected

**One area that has always been a challenge for co-ops has been the issue of scale. Scale can boost organizational capacity, but can also mean larger organizations that may become disconnected from the communities they serve. How did ADP seek to negotiate these tensions?**

One of the challenges in the movement as a whole is the issue of moving from opposition to governance. If you look at any social movement -- people are protesting, but the goal is to govern. Governance is a different skill set, and acting in a way that is in opposition to our existing free market economy and rugged individualism is not easy. It requires constant attention. Creating a worldview, acting on principles, engaging in training, and recognizing the interconnections among people are all important.

It is a constant process. There are challenges in all movements to do that. If I were to critique the existing co-op movement, I would say two things: 1) they are often in silos, not focused on the larger structural inequities of society and 2) they are somewhat apolitical and focused very much

on their own workplace. We have to push ourselves to think and act bigger. For anyone who is participating in a co-op, we have to constantly challenge each other on how to build beyond that.

It is a constant struggle. The cooperative movement is acting in opposition to the existing worldview. It is very challenging both personally and organizationally. If you don't focus on your worldview work or true vision of an equitable society, you can become very inwardly focused, which doesn't address the larger issues.

**Could you talk a bit more about the board structure a little?**

Like all cooperatives, each entity has its own board and its own governance structure. And they all connect to each other via representatives who serve on the ADP board so there is accountability throughout all levels. And there are a set of principles that guide decision-making. One of the key factors of the success of ADP is flexibility and being able to make pragmatic decisions and midcourse corrections. People learn as they go. It is a stretching exercise to challenge oneself to think outside of the box and not get stuck in one structure or one idea. Don't be rigid and respond to the needs of the community, which change over time. We learned from studying Mondragón they call it developing new habits of the mind. Adapt and move towards a vision. So governance also changes, as the organizations and people involved grow and change. The key to any success is that it is rooted in principles.

**A few years ago, ADP changed its name from “Anti-Displacement Project” to the “Alliance to Develop Power”? Could you discuss the reasons for this change?**

When I started in 1993, it was an advocacy organization whose mission was to stop the displacement of low-income tenants from their housing. As we grew and expanded our mission and our constituency, we kept the name for years knowing it wasn't really the right name for us and so we really just used ADP. And the rallying cry became “Who are we? ADP!”

Changing a name is a really big deal when the identities of people are wrapped up in it. Finally, the organization went through a year long strategic planning and renaming process many years ago that engaged hundreds of people. Out of it, three camps emerged: some wanted ~~us~~ to keep the name because the brand ADP was so strong for them, others said lets keep the letters ADP but change what they stand for, and some wanted an entirely new name, out with the old and in with the new. The option to change the words, but keep the letters “ADP” won out. Turns out there are a lot of words that begin with the letters A, D, and P that are relevant to our work, but few that work well in multiple languages. And so, Alliance to Develop Power was chosen. The new name was unveiled along with a new logo when the ADP Worker Center had its public opening about five years ago.

**Many organizations have difficulty maintaining community organizing and community development under one organizational umbrella. How has ADP managed this tension?**

For me, during my time at ADP, the focus was on community organizing first, developing leaders, and winning real improvements in peoples lives and in society. That meant building people power first and economic power second. The institutions that were created came out of community organizing campaigns. They came out of experiences of real people. It wasn't an outside entity that said we want to start a business or that wrote a study and decided how to create jobs. It was a group of folks in the community, who said, "We have these skills. There is a need for jobs. There is a need for food. Let's match our skills and make something new." So it was rooted in the experiences of ordinary people in achieving power that kept ADP honest, so to speak.

### **What do you feel has been the ripple effect of ADP?**

For many years, we were toiling alone as a community organization in the new economy sphere, and it got pretty lonely out there. Now there is a growing movement and interest in the new economy that is across all sectors. Thankfully, organizers and activists and thinkers who are fighting against radical free market fundamentalism aren't just looking at policy fixes, they are now envisioning how we can create an economy from the ground up that reflects our values, puts people first, and brings balance into this crazy world. It is a really exciting time where people are willing to ask those hard questions and experiment in the new economy and ADP is a wonderful example of what is possible.

I want to also stress that ADP is known its cadre of powerful leaders who speak truth to power and who engage in smart, strategic, and successful campaigns. They have won major campaigns on affordable housing, immigration reform, financial reform. And have built strong relationships of accountability with elected officials from Mayors to Senators. Last year, ADP got Senator Scott Brown (R-MA) to support the financial reform bill, bringing in the deciding vote that got that legislation passed. And that is a testament to direct action and the power of people to make change.

### **Could you talk about some other community organizer groups that have done similar community economic development work?**

Just in the sector of community organizing I'm most familiar with, there are a number of groups that are looking to organize housing co-ops or worker co-ops. Of course there is Evergreen in Ohio and the partnership between Mondragon and the Steelworkers. Other examples include PCUN (Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste or Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) in Oregon, where they have a community-owned radio station and other enterprises. There is the Green Workers Cooperative in the Bronx. There is an effort in Missouri led by GRO — Grass Roots Organizing—where they are organizing folks in manufactured housing, where so many families are suffering with predatory mortgages, and they are looking to cooperatively purchase their manufactured housing park. The Filipino Workers Center is leading the way in creating new worker owned businesses and financial services led by immigrant women. In San Francisco there is a group of Occupy folks who are putting together the "People's Credit Union.". And as more and more people look for alternatives to the big banks, they are saying

“Hey, we want to do more than move our money, we want to control how it is used and invest it in our communities”. I believe alternative financial institutions and products that enable people to truly wield economic power — that are just and values based -- will be the next big wave.

There is also an explosion of new ideas and enterprises in the shareable economy – groups like Kiva, Kickstarter, Ride Share – these are not quite the same as building alternative economic institutions, but they are very much about people taking control of their own economic activity and using it to intentionally to benefit the commons.

Community ownership, collaborative consumption, cooperative enterprises – there is a new economic movement blooming right now that is very exciting and it takes all different forms. The definition of community economic development is that it happens locally and is based on context, place, time, and people. The challenge is how to get some of these efforts to scale, but we can never create cookie cutter models because then they won't be rooted in the experiences of everyday people. We can share models, tactics and methodologies but each experiment will be unique.

**ADP, like most nonprofits, has been the recipient of foundation support. Famously, Andrea Smith edited a volume a few years ago titled *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*. How did ADP seek to negotiate the challenges of what Smith has labeled the “nonprofit industrial complex”?**

That is a very important question. I would say a few things. Foundations are crucially important to our work. There are a lot of good people and amazing family foundations out there that are committed to fundamental change — change that is equitable and rooted in the dignity of the human spirit.

However, we've got to find ways to fund our own work. One of the things I am most proud of from my time at ADP, and that I now evangelize, was our ability to create a permanent stream of internally generated revenue. A substantial portion of the organization's revenue has been generated internally through membership dues and subsidiary businesses. The surplus generated from the businesses was invested back into the organizing work, which gave the organization a tremendous amount of freedom and allowed it to take some risks that maybe it couldn't if were 100% foundation dependent.

The structure of nonprofits is actually quite limiting to organizations in our movement. It is quite difficult as a non-profit public charity to create income generating streams or subsidiary cooperative businesses. There are all kinds of regulations about which way the money flows that can easily trip up good people doing good work. We found that non-profit competitive bidding requirements actually harmed our ability to use our own companies because we paid living wages and were not typically the lowest bidder. So we were competing against companies that submitted lower bids because they abused and underpaid their workers.

Another problem is that non-profits are not eligible for SBA loans and are excluded from many traditional financing mechanisms because they lack the ability to provide guarantees for the

loans. We really need to find new models – whether it is benefit-corporations that expand corporate accountability so they are required to make decisions that are good for society, not just their shareholders — or co-ops, or even traditional limited liability companies governed by structures that balance the needs of the individual, the community, business and the environment. In addition to building economic power and creating our own structures, we really need to think about throwing off the nonprofit yoke that is on all of us. This doesn't mean becoming a purely for-profit entity; it means running socially responsible businesses that invest in the commons.

In my work now, I'm organizing young people who are between the ages of 20 and 35. There is some amazing creativity. I just visited Hawaii where a group of tech savvy entrepreneurs created an innovators hub. They share workspace, ideas, social and intellectual capital. They've created their own community economy. It is truly innovative.

The millennial generation is faced with a whole new paradigm – the traditional dream of our children having a better life than we did is no longer true. Student debt, which is now higher than credit card debt, has a stranglehold on young people and the unemployment rate for young people coming out of college is very high, so they have no choice but to come up with new ideas. I think this young generation is going to forge a new path for all of us. They are entrepreneurial and innovative and keep in mind issues of equity and social justice in new ways, but not the traditional ways that I was raised in.

**What made you decide to leave ADP and go work for Rebuild the Dream? Presumably it has something to do with wanting to work at the national level?**

It all goes back to that issue of scale. How can we take these amazing ideas at the grassroots level and scale them up? I am excited to have the opportunity to identify great important work and new ideas, spread them around, share them, and amplify them. And I also can share my experience at the local level with other folks.

It is so important that our movement engage in passing the baton, in paying it forward. I hope to learn from and share experiences and knowledge with a whole new group of people who are engaging in this work. And at the same time, ADP is led by a talented group of leaders, including Tim Fisk the Executive Director and William Cano the Deputy Director, who are truly visionary and who will forge new paths in creating the world as it should be. I can't wait to see what is next for them.

**Rebuild the Dream often appears to be focused on advocacy. But as you have noted, it also aims to build a new economy. Could you talk about these new economy efforts?**

Rebuild the Dream is about building grassroots people-powered innovations to create an equitable and sustainable economy. We have over 600,000 members and are growing every day.

First, we are running important campaigns that will have an immediate impact on the lives of everyday people and on our economy. Right now we are zeroing in on preventing the interest

rates on student loans from doubling and on getting relief for the 11 million homeowners who are underwater. And we are creating smart new technologies to amplify our organizing and advocacy so more people can engage with each other and with decision makers.

Second, we are expanding our work on the ground and in community, especially with young people who hold the key to a whole new future. We are going deep into key states like Wisconsin and Florida and lifting up art, culture, innovation, and smart ideas from the folks on the ground in order to build real power. We just came back from an amazing event in Hawaii where there is a movement to truly build a sustainable economy and where they are on the verge of winning legislation to create a state bank, making it only the second in the country and the first in over 100 years.

And third, we are meeting with and learning from people like you who are innovating in the new economy, what we call American Dream 2.0. And we hope to evangelize this movement and help people in community really build economic power that is balanced and just.

### **Could you provide an example?**

Right now, we have kicked off the “Rebuild the Dream” revivals. We are working with partner groups in key states – bringing together artists, cultural creators, young people, activists in the new economy —to really envision what the dream is. We need to dream big about what society could and should look like. The 99% Spring mass training and actions are moving hundreds of thousands of people to take action and are exposing the role big banks played in crashing our economy and the stranglehold that money has over our democracy. We are so excited to be a part of that, but we also have to lift up solutions.

So Rebuild the Dream is investing in solution oriented policy campaigns, like the state bank legislation that is moving in Hawaii and also going deep with groups that are working in the new economy. In Hawaii, 700 people took over the state capitol in a beautiful expression of our values with poetry, art, music, movement building trainings and small group discussions. We also met with a group of young entrepreneurs who have never considered themselves politically active but want to be part of re-envisioning and rebuilding the dream. These are smart people who have a lot to offer the movement. And rebuild the dream is creating this big tent to identify what the dream should look like and to take action in creating it.

As we travel around and learn from folks and meet people who are really forging the way, we want to be a vehicle to expand the message and share the amazing ideas around the country. We see ourselves as seeding future work — spreading the campaign to create state banks in other places, amplifying the campaign to cap interest rates on predatory loans in Missouri, and so on. How does that translate at the personal level? It may mean moving your money to a community bank or perhaps getting together and creating a credit union. We are really look at the micro economy and macro economy and seeding efforts to create a dream anew.

**Thinking nationally, co-ops are enjoying new visibility in the United States, in part due to growing frustration with what might be called “American business as usual.” This new interest can be seen in many venues, such as with the protestors of the Occupy movement. What do you see as steps that the co-op movement needs to take nationally to build on this new visibility and take advantage of the moment?**

From my experience, and I think the co-op movement is growing and expanding as we speak, but it is a pretty insular movement and it is somewhat inaccessible. Making sure it is inclusive of low-income people and to people of color is crucially important. And addressing issues of equity is crucially important. The economic crisis is nothing new to low-income people and communities of color. We need to make sure these institutions in the new economy are not only inclusive of people who have been hurt most but led by them. That would be one thing.

Sometimes folks become very focused on their own co-op business, and we really need to politicize the cooperative movement and get folks who are committed to changing the relationship between worker and owner to also engage in broader worldview work and engage in politics. Get out of the silo of their business. Get out of the silo of their own work place or business and thinking of themselves as just working with co-ops and thinking of themselves as apart of a broader new economy movement.

I would say a third thing is that we need to de-mystify business creation. *We* are the experts. People can figure things out if we have the tools. That is one of the goals of Rebuild, to really expand this notion of what is possible and reinforce this idea that everyday people can create new enterprises that are just and forge ahead in the new economy.

**What do you see as the top priorities of the U.S. community organizing movement going forward?**

It is impossible to pick one or two. When I think about my work, I think about making sure that it is transformational for the people who are involved in the community and for society as a whole. We need to be organizing for structural change, really changing the institutions that perpetuate inequity.

And we should be thinking big. Certainly we need to achieve small victories in that long march but we have to be aspirational. And right now in this moment we have that opportunity to get out of our issue silos or traditional constituencies and build a real movement that makes our economy work for everyone.

Along those lines we need to figure out ways to rein in the stranglehold that money and lobbyists have over our democracy. We have to change the dynamics of the power that the big banks and corporations have in our government and our economy and really get into the hearts and minds of everyday people so that we can take back our democracy and put people before profits. I think everyone would agree that corporations are not people. And we have to solve the immigration crisis that has tremendous impact on our economy by passing thoughtful immigration reform that reflects our values and honors the dignity of the human spirit.

What is the dream of America? It is certainly not hate and fear. The folks I talk to say it is about values, equity, and being able to envision a future for your children—and your children's children—that is sustainable.

How much is enough? How much is too much? I think all of that is on the table as we work out what is this new economy looks like.

*For more information on the Alliance to Develop Power, see: <http://www.a-dp.org>. To learn about Rebuild the Dream, see [www.rebuildthedream.com](http://www.rebuildthedream.com).*