Fighting for Fair Courts

As the influence of corporate and special interest money in judicial campaigns grows, a robust, nimble, and smart fair courts movement infrastructure is needed more than ever. The ideal of judicial independence is at the very heart of our faith in checks and balances, and increased awareness around this fight is crucial for the future of our democracy.

Wellstone has been partnering with Justice at Stake and organizers across the country in the fight for fair courts. Along the way, we’re helping to change and reshape the conversation among organizers and activists, expanding this work out from within the legal community.

Wellstone trainer Adriana Barboza describes an ‘Ah ha!’ moment she’s experienced with many grassroots organizers: “There has to be a lot of public education around the role of the courts and the critical importance of a fair and impartial judicial system.”

In response to the need we’re seeing, Wellstone will be rolling out a number of targeted trainings in 2016, including a “Fair Courts 101,” to help advocates and grassroots organizers understand what a fair court system looks like, and how that need impacts the work they are already doing.

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In September, coalition partners from eight different states convened in Minneapolis. Side by side, each organization made a plan for 2016. They were able to share and learn from each other, celebrating each other’s successes. Because the laws surrounding judicial elections are different in each state, convenings like this bring a powerful sense of connection to work that can be otherwise isolating.

“We’re focused on coalition building that is strategic, intentional and collaborative,” says Adriana. She emphasizes how easily a compromised system can disenfranchise people of color and the importance of diversity on the bench. She goes on to describe the need for a focus on public education, “Money and the courts are very connected, more so than most people think.”

We’re building national capacity in convenings, and then we’re diving into the toughest on-the-ground battles to win fair courts, starting with the states where our democracy is most at risk.

The rules of the game are stacked against progress. And the very foundation of America’s democracy is at stake.

As Wellstone fights to reclaim and expand our democracy, we’re starting by defending the courts. We’re doing it by strategically marshaling our movement’s resources, innovating alongside leading organizations, building coalitions, and raising our voices. We’re doing it the Wellstone Way.

Wellstone continues its decade-old tradition of training up the next generation of progressive leaders. And we doubled down, with not one but TWO train-the-trainer cohorts this year. Look for these leaders to be winning, the Wellstone Way, in a community near you!
From Ben  continued

This is a huge moment in our organization’s history, a milestone in the work we’ve done together over the past 12 years to continue the power of Paul and Sheila’s legacy. We are humbled by the trust that these organizations place in our work and as one piece of a larger movement, look forward to the important work ahead of all of us.

Today, more than 75,000 alumni in all 50 states are winning—as candidates, as campaigners and as community organizers—the Wellstone Way. And now, with even deeper and broader program offerings around the intersection of organizing and technology, our future and potential impact have never looked brighter.

Ben

Donor Profile: Carol & Valerie

For Carol and Valerie, blithely going through life without thinking about their wills was never an option. From an early age, they both understood that “papering up” was necessary for survival in a system that wasn’t built to protect them.

Valerie remembered Sharon Kowalski, a lesbian Minnesotan, who endured a horrific accident in the 1980s that resulted in severe brain injuries. Sharon and her partner did not have a medical directive that established the legal right for them to make medical decisions for each other, and for years Sharon’s partner was barred by the courts and her partner’s family from being able to care for Sharon.

Carol’s mother, grandparents, and several uncles were held in Japanese internment camps in World War II. “And that was during FDR! We know we can’t take it for granted that society will look out for minorities,” said Carol, “so our communities have to learn to become powerful.” Carol and Valerie educated themselves on the process of creating wills to ensure that when the time came, they could protect each other.

This required paperwork, of course. But more importantly, it required talking about their values. “There are so many who contribute to how well we do in life, so I feel as though it has never been my money, but money I’m entrusted with while I’m alive, and it’s powerful that this same money can keep working on things I care about after I die,” said Carol.

After considering what work to fund, they chose Wellstone Action. Carol remembered Wellstone’s staff and alumni playing a key role in winning marriage equality in Minnesota. For Val, it was the key principle upon which Wellstone Action was founded: that Paul Wellstone was not an anomaly, and that Wellstone Action could teach his skills and philosophy. For both of them, “That’s what we knew our legacy gift to Wellstone could make possible.”

Creating their wills started as a protective measure, but in the end both Valerie and Carol saw it as a deeply spiritual process that empowered them to connect their resources with their values. And one of their shared visions was, and continues to be, a future where passionate progressives have access to the skills, strategies and tactics they need to change our world.

“When it comes to decisions about my legacy, I want to know that there is diversity in the organization, and that it has healthy leadership and will be structurally sound for the future. I know that Wellstone can think big and make powerful change,” said Val. Carol added, “Our legacies will help carry on Paul’s work through an organization that trains people to really make change. That’s an honor.”

Carol & Valerie
Introducing Aaron Browning

Aaron Browning joined our staff in August as a Principal in our political leadership work. He brings more than two decades of experience in grassroots organizing, coalition building, strategic communications and political campaigns to our team.

Prior to joining Wellstone, Aaron was a community organizer, trainer and political coordinator in the family farm and conservation movement. He helped form and then manage the America Votes affiliate roundtable in Montana, bringing together widely diverse organizations to build permanent progressive infrastructure.

Aaron has also served as a program officer with the Gill Foundation in Colorado. As a campaign manager since 2002, Aaron has racked up an impressive number of upset state legislative victories by doing things the Wellstone Way, and he couldn’t be more proud of it!

Look for more about Aaron, and our entire Wellstone team, at our staff page: www.wellstone.org/about/staff.