

Dan McGrath builds on a life of social change for TakeAction Minnesota

By: Nancy Crotti February 13, 2013 0

Dan McGrath didn't exactly spring from the womb as a community organizer, but he might as well have. Fourteen years of Catholic school and having a priest for an uncle and a nun for an aunt instilled a deep and abiding belief in Catholic social justice.

A native of Wausau, Wis., McGrath had his first formal lessons in social justice while on a cross-country trip with his aunt, Sister Kathleen Ries. Ries needed someone to drive her from New York to California for a week of training as a community organizer. McGrath, then 18 and the designated driver, sat in on two days of that training in a dimly lit church basement. Then Ries gave him a copy of Saul Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals" for his flight home. McGrath was hooked.

"He's the grandfather of community organizing," McGrath says of Alinsky. "That was the first book that I ever read that I highlighted and underlined of my own volition."

At Hamline University, McGrath founded a campus racial-justice and community-building group that paved the way to his career. Before he turned 25, McGrath was executive director of Progressive Minnesota, where he managed the successful 2002 "Vote Yes for St. Paul Kids" referendum campaign.

When Progressive Minnesota merged with the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action to form TakeAction Minnesota in 2006, the founding committee wanted a young person with fire in the belly to lead it, according to committee member Mark Schultz.



Dan McGrath became hooked on community organizing at age 18 when he read Saul Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals." "That was the first book that I ever read that I highlighted and underlined of my own volition," McGrath says. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

“We wanted to build a new progressive movement that was multiracial, statewide, and would specifically take on corporate power and was effective. It hadn’t been those things for years,” says Schultz, associate director of the Land Stewardship Project. “He understood what we were after and he wanted it.”

Ben Goldfarb, who had joined Progressive Minnesota in 1999 within months of McGrath, said he recruited McGrath to return to Minnesota from Washington, D.C., to take the job. McGrath was 28.

In the ensuing seven years, dues-paying membership in the St. Paul-based nonprofit has risen tenfold to 14,000 individuals, and to 28 member organizations. Its staff grew from five to 35 and its reach has spread to every legislative district in the state. The organization opened a Duluth office last year and is working to spread its influence from Itasca County to the Iron Range.

TakeAction Minnesota has played a role in increasing voter engagement in the Native American and Hmong communities. It also supported the Dayton administration’s initiative to cap HMOs’ profits at 1 percent and funnel \$100 million of the excess profits into public health care programs. It worked with a national coalition to pass the Affordable Care Act and led the “Save GAMC” (General Assistance Medical Care) coalition that worked to preserve health care coverage for more than 30,000 of Minnesota’s poorest residents.

Voter ID was a key issue

What really put TakeAction Minnesota on the map was this past election year’s battle over the proposed Voter ID state constitutional amendment. When a 2010 Star Tribune poll revealed 80 percent support for the amendment, leaders at TakeAction thought that most people misunderstood what the proposal would do and mobilized its canvassers to spark the discussion.

“Support was broad but it was very shallow,” McGrath says of the amendment’s early backers. “That experience at the doors, talking to people in their community, that there was a way to reframe that issue — we organized people and helped to build coalitions.

“We decided early on this was going to be the focus of our work and we were going to win. We don’t believe in ceremonial victories around here,” he adds. “I think at the time people thought we were nuts.”

They don’t think so anymore. TakeAction Minnesota has attracted national attention as a model grass-roots group that has an organized agenda and dedicated leadership and engages directly and effectively in electoral politics, according to Goldfarb, who is now executive director of Wellstone Action!, a nonprofit dedicated to progressive social change. He describes McGrath as a person of high integrity and authenticity who has grown TakeAction Minnesota “beyond anyone’s wildest dreams” in a very short time.

“It didn’t happen by accident,” Goldfarb says. “It happened because he had a vision and an ability to deliver on that vision.”

Looking at health care

TakeAction Minnesota combines issue advocacy, electoral work and lobbying to make lasting social change, according to McGrath.

“An important function is helping to link together people who think the same way and want to do something about it,” he says. “We’re a network of people who care as much about what is right as about making it happen.”

TakeAction staffers realized that they could leverage the 2,000 new volunteers — along with an expanded email list and new relationships with other organizations that they developed during the Voter ID fight — to wage future campaigns.

The campaigns they have chosen for the current legislative session include making Minnesota’s health insurance exchange not only consumer-friendly but affordable for those currently on MinnesotaCare. The program provides coverage for people under 65 who earn too much to enroll in Medicaid but not enough to afford commercial insurance. They would have to pay more for premiums under the Affordable Care Act, but the Dayton administration announced last week it is closer to a deal to split the costs of the state-subsidized program with the federal government. TakeAction is working with the Dayton administration, U.S. Senators Al Franken and Amy Klobuchar on the deal.

“Minnesota’s got a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a health care mechanism that’s directly accountable to people and can negotiate better prices and a better deal for health care consumers,” McGrath said. “That’s no small feat. We know to do that we need to be able to organize and engage people across the state.”

TakeAction will also push for early voting, online voter registration and voting rights for Minnesotans who are on probation or parole.

“We’re a multi-issue group but we’re very careful about the issues we take on,” McGrath said. “Our two goals are always to win meaningful change that impacts people’s lives and to build the long-term capacity of the social justice movement.”

The McGrath File

Name: Dan McGrath

Job: Executive director, TakeAction Minnesota

Age: 35

Grew up: Wausau, Wis.

Lives in: St. Paul

Education: B.A., English and political science, Hamline University

Family: Wife Teresa McGrath; daughter Harriet (almost 2); second child due in April

Hobbies: Soccer, cross country skiing, running, watching the Minnesota Twins and gardening

RELATED ARTICLES



Push is on to
toughen work zone
laws

February 12, 2014

Discontent mounts
among Range DFLers

February 12, 2014

Transportation
spending picture
stays muddled

February 12, 2014

