

# newsfeature

## A Meeting of the Minds

### Ford Foundation invites national leaders to Milwaukee

by Lisa Kaiser

**November 30, 2006**

Milwaukee is playing host to some of the nation's most inspiring leaders this week. They aren't ambassadors, presidents or CEOs. They're taxi-driver organizers, progressive coalition builders, senior-citizen housing advocates, youth organizers, American-Indian business supporters, and so much more.



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“We wanted to reward and elevate a certain kind of leadership,” said Jaime Grant, program director for Leadership for a Changing World, a program created by the Ford Foundation and others to identify, reward and connect change agents around the country. “We wanted to recognize people in smaller communities who are doing tremendous work. In many ways, what they’re doing is more vital to the community [than larger philanthropists] and they’re able to create sustainable leadership.”

Each leader who was recognized in 2005 received a \$100,000 grant to support his or her organization, as well as \$15,000 for further education. The group meets four times to brainstorm, find support and reflect on the challenges of leadership. The program was set up by the Ford Foundation, the Institute for Sustainable Communities and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. This week’s

gathering in Milwaukee is their third meeting.

“The meetings are unique because the leaders are on totally different turf and they’re not competing for funds,” Grant said. “They can share their failures and challenges and see the similarities in their approaches. I can’t think of one person who was impacted by these sessions. They connect the dots on a different level. They get things in a minute.”



Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett greeted the group on Monday and said he was impressed by the leaders’ accomplishments.

“My reaction is, ‘move to Milwaukee,’” Barrett quipped.

### **Milwaukee’s Leaders Are Recognized**

The 2005 award recipients include two leaders from Milwaukee, Will Allen of the urban farm Growing Power Community Food Center, and Reggie Moore of the youth advocacy organization Urban Underground.

“We’ve never had a winner from Milwaukee before,” Grant said. “And we rarely have two winners from one city.”

Allen is the urban farming pioneer on Silver Spring Drive who is inspiring young people to get involved in agriculture, even though they live in the city. Growing Power encompasses “beyond organic” farming, tilapia raising, vermiculture (using worms to create nutrient-rich soil), beekeeping, composting, and a food co-op. The farm, three acres of intensely cultivated

land that can feed up to 2,000 people, has won a state grant to turn food waste into a source of natural gas. Growing Power also has projects in Chicago, including gardens at Grant Park and Cabrini Green.

“It’s the agriculture of the future and the agriculture of today,” Allen said.

But Allen, while discussing his dreams for his urban farm with his fellow award winners, seemed most interested in sharing his love of the land with young people.

“We need to figure out how to grow farmers,” he said.

Reggie Moore, co-founder and executive director of Urban Underground, also won an award in 2005 and is playing host to the group. Urban Underground sponsors the Youth Empowerment Project in which teens spend a year focusing on developing life skills and enhancing their role in the community. The group also sponsored an urban-rural dialogue about racial issues, participates in school programs and helped build the City Youth Council.

Moore said that exchanging ideas with the other leaders has inspired him.

“It has given me insights into challenges that we all struggle with—human rights, employment, education, safe communities, racial justice,” Moore said.

Urban Underground, now located on Milwaukee’s South Side, was scheduled on Tuesday to hold a youth-led discussion on incarceration, HIV/AIDS and homicide. The group was also scheduled to tour the Black Holocaust Museum and discuss racism in their organizations and in their work as leaders.

### **Networking and Building**

Although the 17 leaders come from diverse backgrounds and locations and are addressing divergent issues within their organizations, they have found common ground in Milwaukee.

Esther Gallow, president and chief executive officer of the Booker T.

Community Outreach in Monroe, La., helped to develop affordable housing for seniors and those with Alzheimer's, which allows residents to stay in their own neighborhood.

Gallow said her visit to Growing Power was inspiring.

"I would love to do this in Monroe," she said. "It's intergenerational, and it would be good for the kids. It would teach them how to survive without going to the supermarket."

Javaid Tariq of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance is helping taxi drivers assert their rights as workers. The group hopes to build a health facility at JFK airport to address the drivers' health problems, since most if not all drivers are without health insurance. Although driving cabs in New York and growing organic sprouts in Milwaukee may seem worlds apart, Tariq said that Allen's Growing Power held lessons for him.

"It's a learning process for us," Tariq said. "[Allen] built this up step by step, and that's how we can build our health center."

Khary Lazarre-White, of the New York youth advocacy group the Brotherhood/Sister Sol, said that he and Reggie Moore's Urban Underground address the same issues.

"After-school programs are a necessity, mentoring programs are a necessity," Lazarre-White said. "Urban education is in a state of disarray around the country."

Loris Taylor of the Hopi Foundation, the largest nonprofit located on the Hopi reservation, will welcome the group next spring, when they will meet for the last time. The foundation encompasses a host of diverse activities, including sponsoring a Hopi radio station, building sustainable businesses, funding scholarships and creating the Center for Prevention and Resolution of Violence in Tucson, Ariz., which helps torture victims—who oftentimes are indigenous people from South and Central America—with their emotional and medical recovery.

Taylor said that the group of leaders has spent their time well.

"It's about as diverse as you can make it," she said. "They have a great intelligence about how they can serve the community."