

The Mission: A Political Role for Everyone

By JANET REYNOLDS

IN a world in which politics increasingly is viewed by the lay person as an us-versus-them proposition, there is an experiment in democracy in Winsted designed to put the people back in the process.

Called the Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest, the non-profit organization, begun by the family of the consumer advocate and Winsted native Ralph Nader, is meant to give town residents the tools to take back City Hall.

The trust finances two positions, that of community lawyer and community technologist. Each is there to help people wend their way through the bureaucratic tangles democracy tends to create. In the next year the trust hopes to add a community organizer to the mix, a leg of the trust triangle that has been missing for a few years, since the original community organizer moved out of the area.

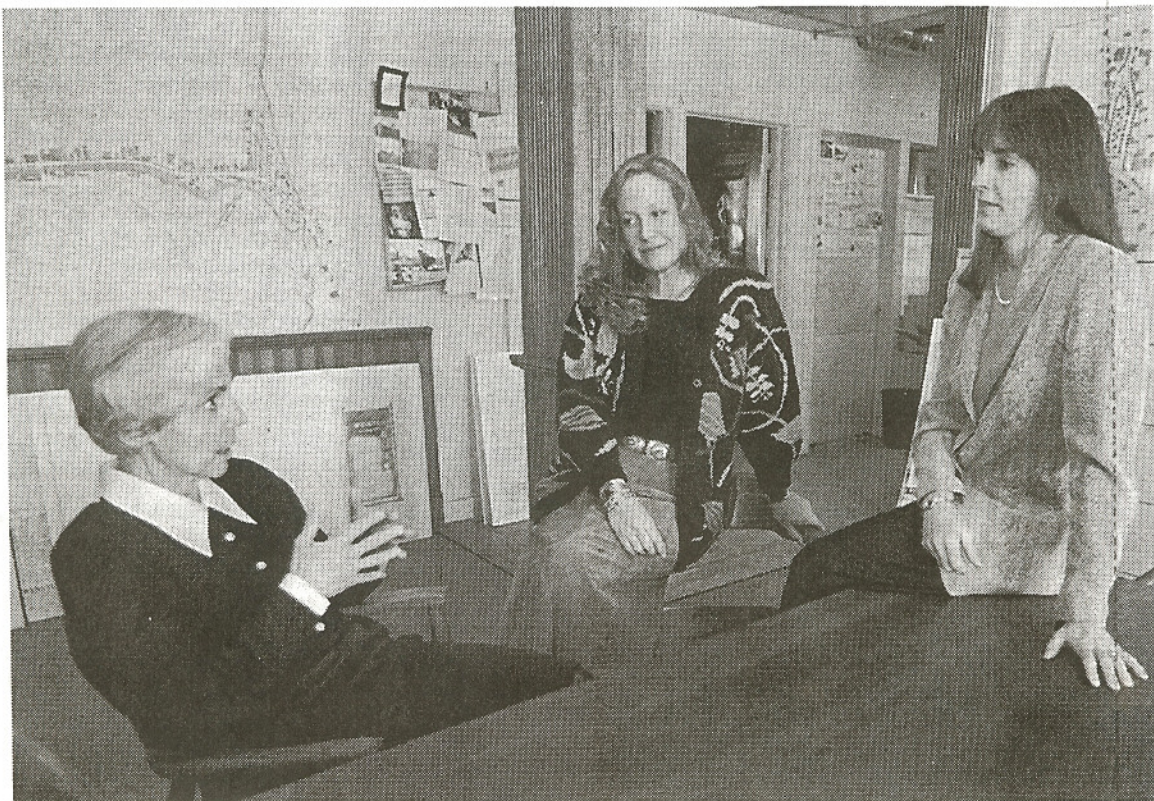
The trust, which is overseen by Claire Nader with input from her brother Ralph and their sister Laura, was established 10 years ago in memory of the Naders' eldest brother, Shafeek, who until his death in 1986 was very active in Winsted affairs. Shafeek Nader had, among other things, founded the committee that in 1965 created Northwestern Connecticut Community College. The college became the first community college to enter the newly created state community college system. He was also a prime mover in creating the town's first industrial park.

"This a proper way to remember him because he was always rooted in the community in a fundamental way," said Ms. Nader, who is a social scientist in Washington, D.C., when she is not in Winsted.

The *raison d'être* of the trust is simple: A democracy is only as good as the people in it. "The trust is about deepening the quality of the citizenry," Ms. Nader said. "Without a quality citizenry you can't rebuild the fabric of democracy."

"The mission is to build community self-confidence," she added. "With self-confidence comes more effective strategies to fuse what we know and what we do."

The backbone of the trust, then, is education and access. In other words don't approach the trust simply expecting a hand-out. Although the trust does help fund local projects, there is almost always a community quid pro quo.



Don Heiny for The New York Times

At the Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest in Winsted, Claire Nader with, center, Susan McGoey, community technologist since 1994, and, right, Charlene LaVoie, community lawyer since 1990.

Take the playscape the town built in a local park a few years ago. True, the trust put up half of the \$40,000 needed for the venture, but Winsted children also collected \$5,000 in pennies while town adults built the playscape. "It was a reminder that the community can come together and build something physically," Ms. Nader said, ticking off other county towns that have since followed Winsted's example. "It's a wonderful feeling for the town to have."

In the same way, the community lawyer, a position held by Charlene LaVoie since 1990, is not the town's counsel. Nor is it an office to which people can turn with personal legal problems. Rather Ms. LaVoie is around to help citizens figure out how to fight their common battles and in so doing remind politicians that their job is to serve not themselves but the community.

"One function is as citizen cheerleader to get people more aware, revved up and committed to practicing citizenship," Ms. LaVoie said. "It's the duty and obligation of the citizens in this country to observe,

analyze, challenge and criticize their government in order to make it a better government. Nothing gets better if we leave it alone with no critical analysis."

Ms. Nader added: "It's politics with a small p. The polity has been left too long to officialdom, who has forgotten their authority comes from the citizenry."

And so Ms. LaVoie has helped interested citizens learn how to petition for referendums and to call for special town meetings. She was also instrumental in helping concerned residents introduce an ordinance to protect municipal trees and a polystyrene ordinance that bans the use of the foam containers with food.

Another time she helped worried residents convince the Board of Selectmen to force Connecticut Light and Power to move a proposed high voltage power line to a less residential area.

But certainly the biggest role the trust and Ms. LaVoie have played in the last two years was first in fighting the closure of Winsted Memorial Hospital, Litchfield County's first hospital, and now in returning emergency health care to the town and surrounding area.

Within days of the hospital board of directors' vote to close the operation, 12,000 area residents had signed a petition decrying the decision, largely at the behest of Ms. LaVoie's office. Just months later these residents had formed a nonprofit organization to fight the hospital's closure.

When the hospital did close, in October 1996, this same organization formed an alliance with Charlotte Hungerford Hospital in Torrington and St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford to create the Winsted Health Center. That center, which will offer emergency care and a variety of specialty and ambulatory care services, is expected to open this year in the former Winsted Memorial Hospital building.

To Ms. LaVoie the speed and savvy

A hometown trust from the Ralph Nader family helps people fight city hall in Winsted.

with which people rallied around the hospital battle is testimony to the impact her office has had since its inception in 1989. "People understood that when the call was put out," she said. "Information would be provided, and there would mechanisms for citizens to figure out what was going on and to do something if they were so inclined. The whole response to the hospital is a great sign that people were moved and motivated enough to take on what they saw as an injustice."

"People feel they have a resource," she added. "Heretofore unless it was a personal issue where people hired their own lawyer, people would let things go and figure you can't fight City Hall. With this free resource more citizens have said 'Maybe I can pursue this a little further because to ignore it is not in the best interests of the town.'"

Susan McGoey, an engineer who has served as community technologist since 1994, does for town technical problems what Ms. LaVoie does for legal issues: Make them understandable in plain English.

"Often these projects seem so overwhelming," Ms. McGoey said.

"A lot of times only one option is offered," she added. "As an engineer I present different solutions."

To date her biggest project has been the multimillion-dollar water filtration plant due to be completed this year. Although the project was already underway when she arrived, she found questions aplenty after she began analyzing it.

The original plan, for instance, did

not call for the replacement of the 100-plus-year-old and leaky pipe system. Ms. McGoey pointed out the leaks and questioned the rationale of filtering water but not addressing the system that delivered it to people.

"There is no point filtering water and running it through dirty pipes," she said, noting too that the town was losing at least half million gallons daily in leakage.

Ms. McGoey also is involved in the improvement of Main Street, a topic of concern that arose in a gathering sponsored by the trust a few years

An engineer and lawyer help guide people through the government process.

ago. At that time residents said they were interested in traffic lights that were more attractive than the standard issue. Ms. McGoey helped find some on green poles that require no maintenance by either the town or the state.

"In order for democracy to be active and participatory people have to have information," Ms. McGoey said. "Providing access to readily available information is critical."

Not surprisingly, this free help is viewed with mixed feelings, especially by those who have felt the sting of trust-inspired questioning.

"If people would be open-minded and see they're trying to do well for the town, some of this infighting would go away," said Winsted Selectman John Forrest, a Republican.

State Representative F. Philip Prelli, a Republican who represents Winsted said: "There have been some times when they have slowed the process down, but they have also done some good. As with any group there are some negatives and some positives."

Ms. LaVoie doesn't let criticism by some bother her. "For everyone who is a loudmouth in the paper with no understanding of what the project is about, there are 25 citizens in favor," she said. "I have touched hundreds of lives in this community helping them negotiate legal obstacles people face every day. Those people carry the message to the community: this is someone who can help or will help."

Indeed, the trust has no plans of cutting back. In addition to adding a community organizer, the trust plans to continue the series of booklets on Winsted's history being prepared by residents and begin an oral history of the town.

"A community has to be reminded of its history," Ms. Nader said. "Those are the roots in order not to lose its way in the present and in the future."

The trust hopes as well to revive Winsted's cultural life. Ms. Nader remembers when Winsted, a thriving manufacturing town when she grew up, had an opera house and community theater.

"How do you define what constitutes a good life?" she asked of the trust's interest here.

At the same time, the trust plans to take its experiment in democracy past Connecticut's borders. It already supports a community lawyer in suburban Elmhurst, Ill., and is exploring opening a site in rural Appalachia, according to Ms. Nader.

Which is not to suggest the trust hopes to become a national influence. Indeed, if everything works according to plan, the trust itself eventually will become obsolete.

"The mission is to do itself out of a mission," Ms. Nader said. "Having resources like this reduces the time of the learning curve on issues. It's not a crutch. It's a shoehorn." ■