Definitions are important. Too often in movement work, we throw terms around and assume mutual understanding. One of the biggest mistakes seems to be in the definition of organizing versus activism. Activism is self expression with the goal of fostering social change while organizing has a much broader focus with the goal of movement building. In short, activism involves the individual, while organizing must involve the entire community. I strongly believe that the current GI coffeehouse projects are excellent examples of effective organizing that can teach important lessons about organizing in general.

This larger definition I want to use for “organizing” comes from a challenging source. A recent article in Counter Punch magazine, “How to Build a Movement,” put a spotlight on Mark Rudd, a controversial organizer. Rudd started organizing with the anti-war group SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in the 1960’s and was later involved in the “Weathermen Faction” which morphed into the notorious Weather Underground, a radical faction dedicated to the violent overthrow of the US government. This group was responsible for several bombings and prison breaks in the 1970’s. I admit it seems ironic to take organizing advice from someone once involved in such a destructive movement; however, like many of the Weather Underground, Mark Rudd in recent years has largely repented of his role in the group’s violence and has shown this by publicly speaking about his experiences (both positive and negative) to a new generation of social justice advocates.

Rudd draws a helpful distinction between activism and organizing in the article. He explains that social change movements today are largely composed of activists and therefore are relatively ineffective (similar to the Weather Underground), while successful movements that actually brought positive change (such as the Civil Rights movement in the South) were largely composed of dedicated organizers. So, instead of narrowly defining organizing as simply building and defending the infrastructure of an organization, I will use Rudd's more inclusive concept of organizing as community-building.

What is a community organizer?

During the Obama campaign, many were either repulsed or thrilled when Obama was said to have been a “community organizer” in Chicago. I wonder if most of the public even knew what a “community organizer” is. Despite some positive progress, I often feel like the peace movement is spinning its wheels. We frequently blame the conservative political environment for our lack of effectiveness, but I wonder if the real problem is that we have forgotten how to engage in genuine community-building.

Thankfully, there are lots of good models from the past to look to for inspiration and education, such as the Catholic Worker movement, the Black Civil Rights Movement, and the United Farm Workers. Today, however, the best example I’ve seen of effective community organizing are the GI coffeehouses/outreach projects.

1 The article is available online at http://www.markrudd.com/?organizing-and-activism-now/how-to-build-a-movement.html
Coffeehouse roots

Contrary to popular belief, in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the anti-war movement was not the sworn enemy of the rank and file American troops fighting in Vietnam; rather they often were allies in fighting against the war machine. A wealth of documentary evidence as well as books (Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War by David Cortwright) and movies (Sir, No Sir) describe GI coffeehouses and underground GI newspapers as episodes of cooperation between motivated GIs and civilian activists.

The movement began with the growing ocean of discontent in the ranks of the US military as the Vietnam war dragged on. While many gave in to despair, other troops found hope by identifying the real root of their problems, that they were being crushed by the same oppressive machine that was also crushing the Vietnamese people. The realization that their own liberation was tied to the struggle for liberation of the people of Vietnam was a revolutionary and critical concept, which led to resistance. Anti-war servicemembers published underground newspapers, went AWOL, and refused to go on missions. They protested, sometimes in uniform and often under the banner of their new organization “Vietnam Veterans Against the War”. Some even committed sabotage on their ships or even “fragged” (assassinated) officers. In one notable case, a soldier stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, actually tried to unionize the military!

Over time the civilian anti-war movement caught up to the revolutionary work of the GIs. In time a partnership was born of out of the mutual respect which was growing between anti-war servicemembers and anti-war civilians. This partnership led to a harvest of incredible and ground-breaking work. The main focus of this collective energy was the GI coffeehouses. These coffeehouses (more accurately described as outreach centers since not all of them were strictly “coffeehouses”) were created to be safe places for GIs to go on their time off duty. The coffeehouses often had fully stocked libraries with anti-war literature and were staffed by GI rights counselors who helped soldiers to navigate the red tape of military bureaucracy. Often there was also music and art to help give GIs a little glimpse of liberation in the middle of otherwise oppressive conditions.

This work was, of course, opposed by the brass. The coffeehouses were sometimes placed “off-limits” by the base commanders, but the troops kept coming. After that, the powers-that-be tried other ways to stomp out the resistance. Local organizers found themselves arrested by the local authorities on bogus charges, and on at least one occasion a coffeehouse was firebombed by local defenders of the war effort. Yet, the work to liberate GIs continued.

I believe that the anti-war GI movement is one of the most important movements in US history. Without it, we might still be occupying Vietnam.

How the movement almost died, but stayed alive to fight again

The end of the Vietnam War sapped energy from the cause, but it is still unclear why the anti-war movement faded away so quickly. Part of the problem might have been how

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2 I mention the fraggings, not to glorify violence but rather to illustrate the level of frustration that servicemembers were experiencing. According to Wikipedia, more than 230 US military officers were killed by their own men during the Vietnam War.

3 The story is told in Up Against the Brass: The Amazing Story of the Fight to Unionize the US Army, 1970, by Andy Stapp.
the history of this era was later rewritten by those in power. Very quickly, corporate and
government interests came together to paint a new picture of what had happened in
Vietnam. Within only six years of the end of the Vietnam war, Ronald Reagan was
elected President. His campaign was based in part on creating a new “history” to
explain why we lost the war so that Americans would “feel pride in their country once
again.” As these lies piled up, the movement slowly suffocated.

The GI coffeehouses died early on. Most were shuttered by the time US troops were out
of Vietnam because the movement didn't see the need to continue the outreach in what
it assumed would be peacetime. Also the military quickly discharged most of the
remaining low-ranking combat veterans, so that before long there were few troops in the
military who remembered that it was the resistance of rank and file troops that made
the end of the Vietnam war inevitable.

But seeds of resistance remained. Vietnam Veterans Against the War lived on (despite
factional struggles that almost destroyed it) and found a new purpose in fighting for
veterans to get their promised and much needed benefits. By the time of the First Gulf
War, there were still a few brave souls in the military that resisted, but no mass
movement rose up. Still seeds kept being planted during these years through the work of
groups like School of the Americas Watch and Voices in the Wilderness.

In 1994, a powerful step forward began when the GI Rights Network (GIRN) was
created. Over the next 16 years, this network of peace and conscience organizations
would answer tens of thousands of phone calls and emails from military servicemembers
seeking help to be free from the war machine. Overall though, there were few remaining
outreach efforts being made toward active duty troops. What little outreach that did exist
was mostly happening online and through print literature not through ground-level
community-based organizing.

The rumblings of rebirth

September 11, 2001 changed everything. As the push to war in Iraq grew closer to
consummation, the anti-war movement woke from its slumber and took to the streets.
Hundreds of thousands marched in almost every major city of the world. Even here in
Oklahoma City, more than 1,500 marched against the war. (There were even protests in
Oklahoma small towns like Shawnee, Guthrie, Muskogee and Weatherford.) Despite
widespread protest, the war began, and most peace activists gave into resignation and
despair. Before long, peace organizers in Oklahoma were lucky if 150 would show up to
our protests. The coming years for many of us in the movement were days of darkness.
We tried to be hopeful, but it all seemed like an exercise in futility.

But then something amazing happened. It was tiny and small, but it was earth-shaking.

The troops began to resist.

It started with Camilo Mejia, the first US soldier to refuse to deploy to Iraq in 2004. He
would later go to prison (here in Oklahoma at the Fort Sill stockade) for almost a year,
but he stood his ground. Soon others rose up to resist as well. A new organization was
founded from this resistance, Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). In the coming

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4 See A People's History of the United States, 2003, by Howard Zinn, p. 623-624
years, other groups would rise up as well to support GI resistance, most notably Courage to Resist. Many long-established peace groups found new life and a new mission in supporting GI resistance.

Despite some successes, the GI movement was contentious. The duration of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the growing psychic trauma was wearing the movement down. It was in this context that a new venue for organizing began to be fleshed out: a rebirth of the GI coffeehouse movement. Consequently these new coffeehouses (along with the one surviving Vietnam War era project) have brought new life and vitality to the peace movement.

**Multiple models for outreach – The Current GI coffeehouse movement**

I have had the pleasure of working with all but one of the new coffeehouse projects. I can't claim to have an objective viewpoint, since the organizers at these projects are friends and allies, but I'd like to make an attempt to share some of their successes and failures in the work of organizing GIs and veterans.

**COFFEE STRONG**

near Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Lakewood, WA

Coffee Strong is the only real coffeehouse among the groups discussed in this article, as it is an actual retail coffee shop located in a strip mall in Lakewood, Washington (near Tacoma). It is located within a few hundred yards of the perimiter of JBLM, in a typical Army town setting. The street is an interesting mix of hole-in-the-wall Asian restaurants, greasy spoons, Army surplus stores and cheap barbers. The neighborhood is definitely rough around the edges but frankly not as impoverished as many other Army communities. The principle strength of Coffee Strong's approach is that they have a decent amount of random foot traffic as a retail coffee shop, which has been a boon to outreach.

Coffee Strong has computer terminals with free internet access and a nice seating area. They also have a library of books and tons of free literature. The decor is a mix of radical imagery (including a picture of Malcolm X holding a gun with the slogan “By Any Means

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5 JBLM was recently formed by the merger of Fort Lewis (Army) and McChord Air Force Base.
Necessary”) and the staff makes it clear that they are anti-war, but not necessarily pacifists. Coffee Strong also has resources available for military victims of sexual assault and has a Women's Night for female troops and vets to connect with each other.

Like all of the coffeehouses, the tone of the place is set by the staff and volunteers. The executive director of the project, Seth Manzell is himself a combat veteran and speaks with knowledge to the folks who come to Coffee Strong. Another staff member (and combat veteran) is a mental health counselor, available to provide services to soldiers in need.

Coffee Strong tries to be visible in the community by the use of public protest. On a fairly regular basis, supporters of Coffee Strong demonstrate at the gates of JBLM.

**A DIFFERENT DRUMMER CAFE**
near Fort Drum in Watertown, NY

This coffeehouse is now closed. I never got to visit this project but have visited the Fort Drum/Watertown community and have read the article, "Shooting Pool Alone at Ft Drum: Lessons for the GI Movement" by Tod Ensign which told its story.⁶

According to Ensign, the project existed from October 2006-May 2009. They had an excellent facility, with internet-equipped computers, a pool table and a library. However, they were located in downtown Watertown, about 12 miles from base, a distance that was insurmountable for GIs without cars.

The project also struggled from not having a committed staff person who was part of the Fort Drum/Watertown community. This has always been a difficult issue (even during Vietnam, many peace activists were not excited about living in the rough Army town environment), but it is essential to have core organizers that are part of the community. Despite these problems, A Different Drummer deserves praise for staying with the project as long as it did.

**NORFOLK OFFBASE**
near Norfolk Naval Station in Norfolk, VA

In 2009, I got to visit Norfolk Offbase while traveling to nearby Fort Lee on a case. On my visit, I was very impressed by both the project's facility and its director, Tom Palumbo. The facility is an old warehouse that provides flexible space for events. There is also a nice library area.

At last report, this project is still in its early stages and is serving mostly as a hub for general peace organizing. I think one big struggle is that Norfolk has a large decentralized military presence, which makes it harder to do outreach. Without a single demonstration focus, it is hard to build much visibility in the community.

**QUAKER HOUSE**
near Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, NC

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This project is not a coffeehouse, but I think worth mentioning as it has been doing direct GI outreach for more than 40 years. The project is faith-based but of a non-dogmatic Quaker variety. The director of the project is Chuck Fager, an author and Quaker historian with a long history of community organizing.

Quaker House serves as the central hub for peace organizing and GI resister support in the Fort Bragg area. Its location is a bit off the beaten path. In the Vietnam era, it was in a grungy neighborhood right next to the bars and strip clubs frequented by depressed soldiers, but today the area has gentrified. Yet, this quieter location works well in providing a haven for soldiers who need to get away from the Army environment.

Besides the local work, staff from Quaker House also take a huge number of calls from the national GI Rights Network. Another special emphasis of Quaker House is their work in publicizing the sadly frequent cases of spousal abuse (and sometimes murder) by soldiers with PTSD.

**UNDER THE HOOD CAFE**

near Fort Hood in Killeen, TX

UTH uses a very different model than the other projects. It is decidedly NOT a retail coffeehouse, but rather is more of a community space. It is located in what was

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7 The story of Quaker House is told in the recently published book, *Yes to the troops, No to the Wars: Quaker House, 40 years of Front-Line Peace Witness* by Chris McCallum.
previously a bail bond office in a fairly rough neighborhood in Killeen, Texas, about half a mile from the East gate of Fort Hood (close enough that you can hear the bugle calls throughout the day when standing outside).

The layout of UTH is fairly open. At the front is a big screen TV with a video game system. Scattered throughout the place are tables, lamps, and comfy chairs and couches. In the very back is a small kitchen (where you can make yourself a cup of coffee for free), and behind that is the director's office and another smaller room with a TV.

Like all of the projects, UTH has a small library and lots of literature from different peace and justice groups. The décor of the place is a mix of images, ranging from a Palestinian flag, art created by one of the regulars, a framed picture of USMC two star General Smedly Butler (who upon leaving the service became an outspoken opponent of war), and clippings from the local newspaper about anti-war activity.

On any given day hanging out at UTH, you are likely to be greeted by Cynthia Thomas. She is the heart and soul of the place and brings the passion of a pissed off Army wife to the fight (her husband served 18+ years in the Army, including several deployments). She stays busy talking to both regulars and new guests of the place. Besides her, on most days there are a mix of active duty soldiers, recently discharged veterans and Army wives hanging out. Many of the visitors smoke (not being a "real" coffeehouse, UTH can disregard the local ban on smoking in restaurants), talk and just enjoy each other's company. Regulars may be found playing video games, checking email, or just talking. Officially the place is open from 5-10 p.m., but often folks don't go home until midnight or later. There are also a decent number of volunteers, some who stay for weeks or even months at a time to help out, while others just come up for the day to provide help for big events such as BBQ's and outreach events.

One logistical challenge of the work at UTH is that many of the regulars don't have their own transportation. Some of these guys are on meds that prevent them from driving, while others just don't have a car. Because of this, Cindy (or one of the other UTH volunteers) drives on base after duty hours are over to pick up the guys from the barracks. Then late at night, someone will drive everyone back to base.

On the weekends, the routine is easier because most of the guys just stay at the coffeehouse all weekend. In fact, even during the week, the odds are also pretty high that you'll see at least one of the guys sleeping on the couches. Lots of the regulars have PTSD and sleep problems and have told me that the only place they can really relax and get good sleep is when they are at UTH.

Protests are a big part of the work of UTH and are most often focused on the lack of quality health care given to combat veterans at Fort Hood. Many of the active-duty regulars got involved after stopping to talk to participants at the protests.

UTH is both blessed and challenged by the fact that most of their regulars happen to be either active duty troops or recently discharged veterans. As a result of this, most of the regulars are only around for a limited amount of time before they get discharged and either go back home or move on to other adventures. Yet, the role of these individuals in shaping the direction of the work cannot be understated. The involvement of the troops and veterans in fighting for the liberation of both themselves and others is critical to a
truly community-based organizing effort at Fort Hood, as well as providing a training school of sorts for vets who will take their activism on to other locales.

I, of course, can't be objective about UTH. These folks are my friends and comrades. I try to spend a few days each month providing legal support at UTH.

**Commonalities and Differences in the different GI Outreach Models**

While each of the projects discussed above look pretty different, there are certain key areas where they all are similar. These similarities can be helpful in providing a model for other venues of community organizing.

1. The projects listen to GIs and veterans without imposing an agenda on them.

2. The projects allow the direction of the organizing effort to be set by the GIs and veterans themselves.

3. The projects seek to be non-judgmental, yet are willing to defend the “safe space” on behalf of marginalized populations. They do this by speaking out when guests use sexist, racist or homophobic language. This is hard to do but necessary. In time everyone sees that the rules of the Army don't apply here. Sexism, racism and homophobia are simply not acceptable, and of course the tyranny of rank is not welcome either.

4. Multiple-viewpoints are expressed and respected. Points of unity are limited to only core areas of concern.

5. The projects are mindful of the mental health and substance abuse problems of the participants and try to steer folks in trouble to helpful resources.

6. The projects empower GIs and vets to help other GIs and vets.

These strengths help to offset the almost insurmountable challenges that the projects face. The biggest challenge is the draining nature of the work. Burn-out is always a real risk, and all too often organizers let themselves be defined by their activism. This is hard enough for civilian volunteers and staff, but for recently discharged veterans this dynamic can be harder. The transition to civilian life (even when the soldier is relieved to be free) can be pretty rough. Making this transition while engaged in activism can be even harder.

Finally, money is always a problem for the different projects. Without the kind of mass support that existed during Vietnam, it is hard to see how a widespread coffeehouse movement could take root today. Fundraising is a continual struggle and source of anxiety for all of the outreach projects.

**Conclusion**

I strongly believe that the current GI coffeehouse outreach projects are excellent examples of effective organizing. The coffeehouses empower GIs and veterans to become organizers themselves. This is important because, servicemembers are told from day one of bootcamp that, “we don't pay you to think.” So when GI organizers tell
those same troops, “we do care about what you think, and we want you to be part of our decision-making process” it can be a significant and life-changing thing. At a GI coffeehouse, GIs are not objects receiving charity, but rather are the subjects of the movement, empowered to make their own history. I think all social movements can learn a lot from this.

GI coffeehouses are also a safe place. It might seem unimportant in today's cyberspace era, but having an actual physical space where people can meet together is important. It is hard work to make the space comfortable and free from oppression for EVERYONE but it is worth it.

Finally the coffeehouses teach us that there is not one right way to organize. There are multiple effective models. Each coffeehouse has strengths and weaknesses, but all stay focused on the local needs. What they do share is a common tactic of combining confrontational protest action with ongoing practical support of those in need. The protests by themselves would have some value (by putting the post on notice that there are folks in the community who care), but this value is multiplied when there is a focus on outreach to GIs themselves. Often the protests draw in radicalized active duty soldiers who are looking for a way to fight back. These same soldiers then become the core of future organizing efforts.

The coffeehouse approach of combining protest with genuine community building is one that would be useful for any social justice movement.

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