

# **Amachi: The Story of an Organization, its Leader and Growing Capacity**

John Price III and Carla Robinson    22 April 2015

Amachi is one of many social service organizations that utilizes AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers to promote social good. Amachi's mission is to provide children who are impacted by incarceration with a different path by establishing the consistent presence of loving, caring mentors, specifically, people of faith. This article describes the story of the Amachi program, and its leader, the Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr. Explored are concepts of leadership and influence, planning and execution and the navigation of relationships.

## **History of Amachi**

Beginning in 2000 as a program under Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), Amachi was founded on the principle of "People of faith mentoring children of promise," and it was able to grow and excel through effective leadership, professional relationships, collaboration and, most of all, an eye toward the mission. Serving populations in the most at-risk communities in north, west and south Philadelphia, its rapid growth is an illustration of how forming and executing strategic partnerships can create a

domino effect that influences the city's industry and policies.

Amachi was born out of a series of well-timed events. For nearly 20 years, P/PV had studied the issue of relationships as a tool for helping young people, while the Pew Charitable Trust was interested in utilizing faith-based institutions to meet social needs. Concurrently, P/PV board member John Dilulio, Frederic Fox Leadership Professor of Politics, Religion, and Civil Society and Professor of Political Science and director of the Center for Research on Religion (University of Pennsylvania), was looking for ways to turn his theory into practice. Dilulio was known for investigating issues faced in poor urban communities as well as studying the influence of religious institutions in those communities. It was his knowledge of those subjects that equipped him with the ability to design pragmatic approaches to addressing disparities in at-risk communities. Deciding on a population that needed to be served, children of incarcerated parents, and a method for serving the population and addressing current problems, using the religious institutions in these children's communities, Amachi was created, and P/PV and Dilulio set out to execute the plan.

As a nationally recognized program evaluation firm, P/PV had strong relationships with many of the nonprofits it studied, one being Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew was seeking alternatives to unsuccessful initiatives through its Religion Department, and P/PV was able to offer a new

approach to utilizing religious institutions to serve impoverished communities. Consequently, P/PV was able to obtain seed funding from Pew to define a model for a mentoring program for children of the incarcerated, which would eventually become Amachi. Recognizing the importance of relationships in building a successful organization, P/PV selected their then-consultant, Dr. Goode, to be the leader to propel Amachi forward, mainly because of his relationships with both the secular and the religious communities in Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, as a former advisor during the George W. Bush presidential campaign, Dilulio was appointed by Bush to head the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. It was Dilulio's (and Amachi's) influence that eventually led to an influx of government funding being directed towards mentoring children affected by incarceration. The rapid growth of Amachi and the formation of many affiliates across the country was galvanized by the Amachi Training Institute (ATI), which trained similar mentorship programs in best practices. Not only did ATI provide important technical assistance, its five-part series allowed for Amachi affiliate leaders to network and build relationships.

## **AmeriCorps VISTA – Getting things done**

The goal of creating sustainable operational approaches for the Amachi program naturally led to a partnership with

the Corporation for National and Community Service and AmeriCorps VISTA. Amachi's capacity building and expansion is due in no small part to the work of VISTA volunteers who live and serve in some of the nation's poorest urban and rural areas. With passion, commitment and hard work, they create or expand programs that are designed to help bring individuals and communities out of poverty. Rather than reinventing the wheel, they focus their efforts on building the organizational, administrative and financial capacity of organizations that fight illiteracy, improve health services, foster economic development and otherwise assist low-income communities (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorps-vista>).

The AmeriCorps VISTA motto of "getting things done" married seamlessly with Dr. Goode's leadership philosophy and implementation approach. Amachi's initial grassroots work was performed by Dr. Goode along with P/PV staff. In just a month and a half, Amachi successfully recruited 500 volunteers from 42 churches located in neighborhoods that were most affected by incarceration. In order to identify the children who were suffering the social consequences of having an incarcerated parent, Dr. Goode sought the guidance of the five prison chaplains who visited the jails within the City of Philadelphia prison system. Additionally, Amachi partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters Association Southeastern Pennsylvania to screen and orient volunteers.

VISTA volunteers were pertinent to Amachi's maintaining a non-bureaucratic relationship with partnering religious institutions. Strategically focusing on the target population and partnering entities, community volunteer coordinators (CVCs) and community impact directors (CIDs) were appointed from within the church congregations or contiguous communities as stipend volunteers to perform administrative duties for the emerging mentoring program. The CVC and CID roles were eventually combined and became a position under the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Structuring CVCs and CIDs within the VISTA framework and recruiting them from within the communities not only created internal leaders but laid the foundation for sustaining the work and progress in the community.

AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers were instrumental in laying the foundation for managing mentor relationships. They recruited and matched mentors and mentees in congregations and communities, collected and analyzed mentorship data and formed and maintained the relationships with all individuals and organizations involved with fulfilling Amachi's mission. The VISTA volunteers were not widely recognized and highly visible leaders, like Dilulio and Dr. Goode, but they were the important faces, leaders in their own right who were accessible to congregants, children and families in the communities. They were charged with executing the growth of Amachi, serving as foot soldiers within

Philadelphia's most underserved communities. Ultimately, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers built Amachi by making over 3,000 mentorship matches while maintaining and monitoring performance standards.

## **Evolution of a Historic Leader**

As one might expect, the leader of the Amachi program has an incredible backstory. On his way to becoming Amachi's president he: grew up in a sharecropping family; experienced the imprisonment of his father; worked as a probation officer; was a city manager known for riding garbage trucks to promote a blue collar image; succeeded Frank Rizzo as mayor of arguably the North's most racially charged city; and eventually answered his calling as an ordained minister. Most of these highly publicized factoids are the ingredients that typify a Hollywood movie script.

"So moved was I by [my mother's] unselfishness and her reaching out to this man that I went to my room where I'd hid about \$0.50 under my mattress, and ran after him, calling "Mr. Hobo!" (That's the only name I knew) and gave him the money which I had. And at that point in my life, I knew I was different. I knew that what I wanted to do with my life was not to become wealthy...but to serve. I wanted to serve to help people who could not help themselves."

This was the riveting culmination of a story told by the Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr., first African-American

mayor of Philadelphia, and president of Amachi, during our interview. While we sat rapt like two preschool children who had just learned where babies come from, he was describing a random encounter circa 1950 in which his mother demonstrated selfless Christian generosity toward a homeless Caucasian wanderer in the Jim Crow farm country of North Carolina. As Dr. Goode concluded the account of the inspiration behind his eventual career path in public service, it probably took us a good minute to remember that we were, in fact, not actually in church but rather in a stately and simple work office. Which suits the man perfectly.

## **Dr. Goode's Leadership Philosophy**

Sitting across from Dr. Goode, there was a clear sense that nothing about his workspace was merely aesthetic. There was basically a desk, a file cabinet and a furnishing here or there that just barely occupied 50% of the wall space but was 100% utilitarian. Upon our arrival, he'd summoned us in with one hand to two chairs. Behind his desk, he appeared at the helm of a nonprofit command center, minus the frills of the Starship Enterprise. The only gadget—a noticeable non sequitur—was a surprisingly modern mobile phone tethering an earpiece. We had found him so tied up in a critical phone call that we had to sit and wait about 20 minutes before we could introduce ourselves as "your 4 o'clock." At age 76, there was at least one theme about this man that just emanated from his

being: leadership.

A critical aspect of the Amachi story (vis-à-vis the Goode story) has so much to do with the merging of Dr. Goode's experience as both a minister and a former politician. As a minister, the reverend could grasp the deepest nuances of Amachi's emphasis on faith, something that other pastors and colleagues acknowledged as his "knowing the language" of the Christian community. Understanding how to do things "decently and in order," Dr. Goode was savvy enough during his initial volunteer recruitment campaign, for instance, to require that volunteers obtain permission from their pastors before joining Amachi. His approach offered proper recognition of the role of church leaders, and cultivated their buy-in and eventual participation. Finally, from the pulpit, Dr. Goode's own platform, he has also regularly promoted the Amachi program, advancing its mission biblically. All of these show the reverend wearing or leveraging his minister hat in order to fulfill the faith-related duties required of Amachi's leader.

As a former politician, Dr. Goode was also equipped to fulfill other key aspects of his presidency. Utilizing his government management expertise, he understood the law with respect to using federal dollars for faith-based programming while avoiding the conflict that can occur when government money supports proselytizing.

Moreover, he knew to respond quickly and strategically when the government shifted its priorities and offered a

window of opportunity (e.g., responding to a \$50 million influx in funding from the Bush administration for mentorship programming by launching the Amachi Training Institute). Grasping politics also meant having to validate Amachi as a difference-making organization by presenting hard data on its impact and outcomes (much the way politicians must do during a reelection campaign). Finally, having to “reach across the aisle” was a comfortable posture such that he could work with both faith-based (church) and secular (Big Brothers Big Sisters, etc.) partners in order to advance the Amachi mission.

What is most essential, though, is how these different roles, attributes and experiences came together to influence Dr. Goode’s leadership style and philosophy as seen through the Amachi organization. His style is exceedingly simple, straightforward and purpose-driven: He simply believes in getting things done. So much so that while Dr. Goode was still just a consultant, Amachi’s incumbent director ceded his leadership role to the reverend on the basis that he had single-handedly recruited the entire inaugural cohort of volunteers from several dozen local churches (mainly by virtue of personal visits and phone calls) in such a short period of time. The man is no stranger to hard work and long hours that culminate in goals being achieved.

Being efficient, then, is also critical. When asked about differences in his leadership in a government versus a nonprofit capacity, he suggested that “leadership is

leadership." Being a boss is not leadership. Clear mission and vision are essential, because one simply does not get massive, sustainable results unless the people around you can grab hold of and follow the plan. As mentioned, Amachi was able to secure millions of dollars in government funding in order to scale their operation and offer training and technical assistance to partner organizations, largely on the basis that it was a lean organization (roughly seven staffers at one point) with a track record for these results. Ineffectiveness in an organization, Dr. Goode contends, leads to an inability to properly serve your audience. This is why trainees must adhere to certain Amachi "imperatives" (e.g., child abuse clearances, one-on-one mentorships, and so on); they are recognized best practices that culminate in positive outcomes for mentored youth.

This speaks to a third component of Dr. Goode's philosophy, which is to do the most good possible, and at the heart of the Amachi mission is the desire to dismantle the prison industrial complex altogether. In the United States—because of imbalances in the scales of justice that disproportionately affect the African-American community—this machine continues to undermine and destroy families, education opportunities, the economy and society at large. So the investment of mentorship in the life of a young person impacted by his or her parents' incarceration is viewed as a strong force for good. Dr. Goode considers Amachi to be "a service corporation." Its

very product, he says, is service, and if it is not providing service, it is not fulfilling its mission.

In this snapshot of a leader's relationship with, and impact on, his organization and community, one can glean some meaningful takeaways. First, some things only get done when a leader rolls up his or her sleeves and takes action, and this was as true in the initial volunteer campaign as it is today. Next, a clear vision and strategic plan make a world of difference, and allow you to know when goals are reached. Without such a plan and vision, Amachi would not have been able to scale its work in both direct service and technical support. And finally, relationships matter, which is something Dr. Goode understood early in life. After being in existence for nearly 15 years, Amachi is at a turning point in its organizational life cycle, with a change in leadership imminent by virtue of the reverend's age. All of this was captured in his final words to us as we ended our interview listening to the "hobo" story: "And since that time, if you look back on my life, it's been a life of service. And so that's where it started...Your time is up."

## **Author Biosographies**

**John Price III is the cofounder of Better Days Ahead ([www.BetterDaysAhead.org](http://www.BetterDaysAhead.org)), a ministry that empowers people through Christian generosity. He is currently pursuing a master's certificate in nonprofit administration from Penn's Fels Institute of Government.**

**Carla Robinson has over 10 years of experience in the nonprofit field, including formerly serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer, and she currently works for Penn Medicine Development and Alumni Relations. Ms. Robinson holds a BA from the University of Chicago in human development.**