

“If We Come Together, Then We Have Power”

Snapshots of Organizing Families

Center for Policy, Research, and Evaluation

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COFI

Community
Organizing and
Family Issues

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About the Center for Policy, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) at NYU Metro Center

The Center for Policy, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) at the NYU Metro Center conducts applied research and evaluation studies focused on promoting positive educational outcomes for youth, and understanding the influence of both schools and communities on those outcomes. PRE is committed to using data collection methods that are culturally and linguistically relevant to historically and presently marginalized communities' ways of being.

About Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)

COFI's mission is to build the power and voice of parents, primarily mothers and grandmothers from Black and Brown communities, to shape the public decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families. COFI strengthens the power and voice of low-income families in all areas of civic life—from local institutions and communities to state and federal policy arenas.

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Introduction

For nearly two years, Community Organizing and Family Issues and POWER-PAC IL parent leaders participated in the Parent Power and Leadership Project (PPLP), an effort to share how social justice organizations support the learning and growth of parents, youth, and communities. PPLP tells the real-life experiences of parent leadership and organizing groups across the country who work tirelessly to make their communities better through personal capacity building, policy and service improvements, and mutual care.

Five parent leaders and their families are highlighted in this series: Marisol, Delia, Isaiah, Katrina, and Kekeisha. Their stories are based on 24 in-depth interviews and focus groups, including 15 interviews with the children of parent leaders ranging in age from 7 to 23.* Their stories show how [COFI Way Leadership Development](#) doesn't just help to transform parents, but it also helps to inspire and activate youth, families, and communities. As the following pages reveal, families shared their quest to remain engaged in their communities, discuss policy priorities widely, speak up when something wasn't right, and continue to envision and act towards the changes they want to see in their communities. These organizing families provide snapshots of current and future community leaders protecting democracy and strengthening the rights of all.

This deep dive with families is the second part of a three-year project that began with a first of its kind landscape analysis of social justice parent leadership groups across the country, surveying 182 groups (Geller et al 2023), many who selected to be included in the "[Parent Power Map](#)" and five groups who agreed to be part of a case study. Core survey findings indicate: there are parent leadership groups in every single state across the country, there is strong racial and linguistic diversity where Black and Latino parents are the most represented racial group, women make up the largest share of the base of organizations, and groups are multi-issue, often focusing on holistic whole-family supports. The Parent Power map is a tool to connect groups and facilitate networking and alliance building to strengthen the movement of parents organizing for social, economic, and racial justice (Garcia et al 2020). To learn more, visit the [Parent Power and Leadership Project](#) landing page.

** Some names of youth and parents are pseudonyms at their request.*

“There Is More Communication”

Marisol's Family

“I say, that if it wasn't for COFI, my mom would not have evolved as a mother, because it opened her mind, it taught her many things she didn't know.”

— Ashley



Originally from Durango, Mexico Marisol Luna has been involved for five years with COFI and is the vice president of POWER-PAC IL representing parents in Aurora and Illinois. She describes herself as an optimistic person, a dreamer and as always wanting to improve

With COFI and POWER-PAC IL, Marisol has found support that lifts her up in difficult times and where she feels she belongs, “I am from here. These are my people; this is my family... I am not alone,” says Marisol who has been deeply involved in the Mental Health Justice and Equity campaign. As part of that campaign, parents led a statewide survey and found that the community had many barriers for access to healthcare, exacerbated by COVID-19. For that reason, families are dealing with depression, fear, and panic. Together with the group, Marisol provides help to parents by organizing support groups. Marisol continues fighting so that families have the necessary resources to get ahead, including the expansion of benefits for undocumented people.

Beyond developing her community leadership, Marisol has learned many interpersonal tools through the COFI Way and the Self, Family, and Team training. Her husband Noel has noticed a big change in his wife, who today is more expressive and self-confident, “not like before where she would be bashful and shy in front of many people... I look at her that she is very relaxed. She lost the fear,” says Noel. Noel notices change in her “way of thinking” and in how today “she knows how to listen to you.” With the kids, “she speaks to them much better, gives them advice, gives me advice” and “there is more communication” in the family, explains Noel.

Ashley (18) says her mom is happier since she has been involved. Ashley has herself participated in community service projects and cleanups. “It feels good to help my community because I know that it helps in a positive way,” says Ashley. Her mom motivated her to make a testimony in the City of Aurora defending the right of food trucks she frequented often. Thanks to the community support, the City allowed the food truck businesses to remain. Ashley appreciates that her family can talk and

disagree about politics. “For us politics is a pleasant conversation. It is a good debate. No one ends up with their feelings hurt. We always finish talking about priorities... we never end mad,” says Ashley. She has been motivated to more about politics, “COFI has awakened my interest in political science,” she says. Marisol mentions with pride that Ashley has found her own leadership.

Emmanuel (7) says his mom has fun at “work” involved in her community, making calls and doing “important things” in his school and when she visits representatives in Springfield. Alexi (12) also explains that trips with COFI to Springfield is an opportunity for family time, “I loved going there, a new place in Illinois, and spending quality time with my family and exploring together, says Alexi.

Yarel (10) often accompanies her mom to COFI and POWER-PAC IL gatherings. She says her mom is “intelligent, ready, and amazing” and she fights so that students have healthier lunches. She also knows that because of the efforts of her mom and other parents the city added a stop sign to a busy intersection. Yarel is involved in her school as a “patrol guard,” helping kids cross the street, cleaning tables after lunch, and being an example for others. One day when her teacher showed a photo of capitol building, Yarel said “I don’t have to see a photo, I have been there! – proof that Yarel and the rest of her siblings keep learning together with their parents. The family has the vision of meeting more of their neighbors and community and to continue being involved in positive change.



Top: Marisol and her husband Noel with their children Yarel and Alexi at a holiday posada with Illinois State Senator Karina Villa (left)

Middle: Ashley at her high school graduation with her brother Cesar

Below: Marisol Luna and her son Emmanuel



“We Have Power”

Delia's Family

“What’s important to me is to get by and live life, but keep doing what I’m doing. The sky’s the limit. That’s how I feel about it. If you can think it, it’s possible.”

— Delia

Delia Perez is a mother to three children and three grandchildren. Her grandmother was born in Puerto Rico and raised 13 children who all spoke English and Spanish. Despite dropping out of high school and losing her mom at the young age of 18, Delia graduated with her associate’s degree in criminal justice and has been involved with COFI for almost a decade.

Delia began her school involvement over 20 years ago. First, she advocated for her sons who were both diagnosed with ADHD (Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder) avoiding the pressure to place them on mood-suppressing medicine in preschool. Since then, she has supported others navigating the Individualized Education Programs (IEP) process with their children.

Delia first learned about COFI when she attended a Student Code of Conduct training at her son’s school led by POWER-PAC IL leaders. She is now the co-chair of the POWER-PAC IL Stepping Out of Poverty Campaign. She has worked to expand the Illinois Child Tax Credit and is part of a group of parents who knock on 25,000 doors annually sharing information about early learning.

Delia is passionate about her organizing and simultaneously she is also working on focusing on herself more often. “This is a new thing because I have mainly focused on everybody else,” says Delia. “As a Community Healer, you have to check yourself before you can help others and actively listen, or else you’ll just be focused on your own trauma,” she adds. Active listening is a skill she has advanced through her COFI Way leadership development. And taking time for herself is a key component of being able to be there for others.

Derril (20) describes his mom as “social, hardworking, and relentless.” He is proud of his Puerto Rican and Black roots: “Our family is a vibrant mix of cultures, and we cherish the diversity that makes us who we are,” says Derril. He recalls seeing his mom on the front page of a newspaper after a POWER-PAC IL policy victory. The

joy on her face inspires him to find his own sense of purpose. Derril is motivated to engage in his community alongside his family: “I’d love to see my family even more involved in community projects and initiatives. For that to happen, we’d need more opportunities for everyone to participate, maybe through family-friendly events or workshops,” suggests Derril.

Delia’s son Josh (23) describes his mom as “independent, loving, and outgoing.” He explains that his mom puts her focus on community organizing “24/7... she is dedicated, she is a good leader,” he adds. As a father of two young children, Josh recognizes the importance of making the world better for them, especially given the current racial divisions. “One of the key learnings [for me] has been the importance of collective action. By seeing and hearing how [POWER-PAC IL leaders] work together with other families, I’ve realized that our voices are stronger and more impactful... if we come together then we have power,” says Josh. When his kids start kindergarten, he plans to participate in their schooling, just like his mom has with her children.



Delia Perez and her two sons, 2015 and 2023

From Destroyer to Builder

Isaiah's Family

"I was a destroyer of my community, and now I'm going to rebuild it. I'm doing this with COFI, which helped me reevaluate the way that I think and reevaluate the things that I do and made me understand that one person can make a change, and more than one can make a greater change."

— Isaiah

Born in Yazoo, Mississippi, Isaiah Rogers has lived in Chicago since the 1960s. He is a father to 16 children and today describes himself as a community builder. For the past decade, Isaiah has been an active parent leader with COFI and POWER-PAC IL as well as many other father groups. He is currently the parent representative for the Chicago Southside Parent United Roundtable (SPUR).

At COFI, Isaiah has found purpose and reliable mentors, especially Ms. Rose. "She reminds me of how much we're needed to help our communities, to do better and greater things inside our community. Not sitting around waiting on somebody to come and help us, but get out there and help ourselves and help others," says Isaiah.

Along with many other parents, Isaiah advocates for the need for more peaceful and supportive restorative justice methods in schools. He uses his experiences to support others going through similar challenges, particularly fathers wanting to rebuild their lives like he did. "Chocolate Drop," Isaiah's youngest son (10), became a great motivation for him to turn his life around and become an engaged father and community member.

Chocolate Drop looks up to his dad's humor, candor, and community involvement. He talks to his teachers and family members about accompanying his dad to organizing events. "If he goes to important meetings, I go with him all the time... I like to go," explains Chocolate Drop. "He's proud of it, and that's what enables me to keep going," says Isaiah. Chocolate Drop says his dad teaches him how to "be a black man and respect other people."

Binky, seeing the transformation in Isaiah, has also become involved with POWER-PAC IL and COFI. She has worked on lowering gas costs in Chicago, using her own family's exorbitant bills as examples of the importance of utility affordability. She also helped to pass a statewide children's savings account program. Importantly, community organizing helps her to see a "brighter side" and a "brighter day" to be a better mom for Chocolate Drop. The sentiment is similar for Isaiah, "You can help your family physically, mentally, and also spiritually. [Community organizing] enables me to be a better father and gain a lot more understanding in these difficult times," he says.

Chocolate Drop has been to Springfield many times with his dad Isaiah and mom Binky. He wants to be a Senator one day and to share resources with people experiencing homelessness: "I want to give the homeless people some clothes, some shirts, and some food.... I think we need to give them a little money for them to get better, like getting their house back and stuff," says Chocolate Drop.

Chocolate Drop says he is happy to see his parents talking to "government people" to fix things that need to be fixed. He knows he can talk to his parents about anything, including his experiences with bullying in school. He speaks up about unacceptable school lunches including an "ice-cold" hotdog he once had, which further motivated his parents to continue to organize around healthy foods in schools.



Isaiah Rogers and his son Chocolate Drop enjoying quality time with fellow POWER-PAC IL families

Isaiah feels proud to be better equipped to support Chocolate Drop, as well as his other children and family members: "It makes me feel good to be able to guide them or to refer them to somebody that they can get some help with. I have more resources now," says Isaiah.

Isaiah plans to remain engaged in community organizing and involved with COFI because "the more they see me do it, the more curious they are," he says.

“We Made Everyone Come Together”

Katrina’s Family

“I’m just trying to keep myself going with these babies. I don’t want them to go through what we went through as kids... You want them to be around people that’s going to help them progress a little more to learn different things.”

— Katrina

Katrina Falkner has been a caregiver for siblings, nieces, and nephews for as long as she can remember. She comes from a long line of “community moms” and countless neighborhood and church youth call her “godmother.” She considers herself a lifelong learner and is known for raising awareness of social issues on social media.

For almost a decade, Katrina has been active with COFI and POWER-PAC IL—where she expanded her ability to dream big, set goals, and use support around her to create positive change for youth and her community. “Everything we wrote in our book from [the COFI Way] Self, Family & Team 10 years ago, it’s happening,” explains Katrina. Currently, Katrina is the Co-Chair of the POWER-PAC IL Mental Justice and Equity campaign.

With POWER-PAC IL, Katrina has been part of historic wins to decrease police presence in schools and divert funds toward restorative justice and social emotional learning. Organizing to end youth contact with law enforcement and the criminal legal system is deeply personal for Katrina, who remembers being in trouble often as a young person.

After serving time in a correctional facility in her 20s, she returned home determined to create more nurturing environments for young people. One of her proud accomplishments is forming a youth dance group called “The 66th and Union Crew,” named after her former block in the Englewood community. Katrina founded the group because youth were often turned away from afterschool programs due to cost or capacity. She has connected youth to sponsored opportunities like Toastmasters trainings and organized community dance performances showcasing young talent. “It brought positive energy, helped us believe in ourselves, and made me less shy,” says Lashawonna (15), one of the youth participants. “We brought joy, we brought happiness... we made everyone come together,” adds Quoan (16), reflecting on the group’s experiences.

MyShayla (14), whom Katrina has been raising since birth, has joined COFI and POWER-PAC IL gatherings since she was three, learning from the organizing of parents. Today, MyShayla is an advocate for mental health and anti-bullying at her school. She is a peer-mentor who encourages classmates to attend class on time and to resolve conflict peacefully. She is also a student manager for the football team, along with her twin sister Chevelle, who says Katrina’s community involvement makes her “want to help others.”

Solivia (12) also joins COFI activities, including all-day lobby visits to Springfield. She looks up to Katrina, describing her godmother as a kind person who helps her community, goes to church, and makes others feel better with her positive energy—attributes she tries to embody too.

Katrina enjoys interacting with parents across the city and state through her organizing: “We all work together as a team motivating each other... ”it’s not always the bloodline that you go through, but the people you’re around,” she says, echoing how youth in her life describe the welcoming and supportive spaces she encourages.

Katrina’s vision is to one day run a shelter and youth center focused on youth and young adults, including those who have been incarcerated.



Above: Katrina Falkner (center with hands on knees) with 66th and Union Crew youth and Alderman Stephanie Coleman (far right) at the Englewood Stomp the Yard Event, 2025.

Inset, right: Katrina wearing a POWER-PAC IL shirt



“I Can Make a Change”

Kekeisha’s Family

“My whole thing is to do something in this world that’s important... I’m doing good because now they want to do organizing and see things that they want changed. They’ve hopped into it without me even pushing them.”

— Kekeisha

Kekeisha Beasley is a mother of eight and grandmother of one. She was born in East St. Louis to a mother who gave birth at 14. Kekeisha grew up along neighborhood friends who loved to run and jump rope. Today, she describes herself as fearless, strong, and a people person.

Kekeisha is the co-founder of Parents United for Change in East St. Louis, where she has been involved with COFI and POWER-PAC IL for around 12 years and collectively has accomplished many policy changes. She has helped to improve student busing in the district. Her experience of having a close high school friend sexually assaulted on her way to school influenced her passion for ensuring all kids get to school safely on a school bus. Alongside other parents, Kekeisha also successfully helped to lower late fees in public housing. She organized to add more stop signs on busy intersections. During COVID-19 school closures, she advocated for virtual learning opportunities for youth.

Community organizing and COFI Way leadership development trainings have made Kekeisha a better listener with her kids. At home, her kids “have a voice” ... “they always have an input. Always. I’m not just looking at them as the little guys and I’m just an authority type person,” says Kekeisha proudly.

Recently widowed, Kekeisha considers herself a resource for her community, always connecting friends and neighbors to vital information. Currently, she works part time at a community center where she mentors youth and stays involved in her community as much as possible.

Jermiya (10) considers her mom her biggest role model and says, “it makes us feel very happy to see our mom do amazing things” for our community. She has seen her mom support her classmates academically and has felt the impacts of Kekeisha’s organizing within schools. For Jermiya, this taught her that: “kids can basically lead like adults can” and their actions can make a difference.

Andrew (14) notices his mom's community involvement. Kekeisha volunteers at his school. She speaks up about potholes and disinvested streets. She goes out of her way to purchase shoes and clothes for youth in the community who need them. He describes his mom as "helpful, kind, and outgoing." He also loves being part of a family that hosts themed gatherings with food and snacks for all to share. Andrew spreads kindness, like his mom, by crafting key chains made from resin and baking. He also cleans up garbage around his neighborhood.

Similarly, Aaron (17) says his mom "inspires everybody else to get involved." Aaron has joined his mom passing out flyers in his community around early learning opportunities for young children. He mentions his own desire for becoming more involved in his community too. "I can make a change in East St. Louis, make something out of East St. Louis," says Aaron optimistically.

Kekeisha's family talks about things they want to improve in their community and schools. Among these including wanting school curriculums to include more African American history. Andrew wants to bring textbooks home and not get in trouble from school for doing so. Aaron aspires to start a landscaping business to make his community more beautiful. Jermyra believes people experiencing homelessness need help and support just like everybody else.

Kekeisha plans to continue working with youth and is hopeful that her children will continue engaging and investing in East St. Louis: "They're helpers as well. They have the same values as I do," she says.



Above: Kekeisha Beasley with decorative flowers in her hair

Below: Kekeisha's youngest children

