Umoja Joe

By Lila Leff, Umoja Student Development Corporation

It was spring of 2004 when Joe interviewed to become the Program Director at Umoja Student Development Corporation in Chicago. Umoja is a weird hybrid of a youth development/ educational reform organization. We operate from the premise that all sustainable change (for individuals and systems) has to happen in the context of meaningful relationships; that purposeful relationships are the first step in making anything better - even the hard core, long-term impacts of poverty. Our operational formula is part art and part science. It involves moving into the most under-resourced and under-performing high schools in Chicago and walking beside students in their journey. We partner with the adults in their lives to improve their schools. We craft an experience to help students transition from the march of futility they have long ago internalized as their educational future onto a path that inspires hope and vision for their life in and after high school, imbuing it with creativity, compassion and citizenship. That's the goal in a nutshell. It's messy, complicated, beautiful and rewarding stuff.

When Joe emailed from Philly to see if he could interview at Umoja, we were at an organizational crossroads. A number of good people had come to work at Umoja over the several years we had been in existence, and they were running good programs that were making a difference in students' lives. Beyond reporting the positive feedback we got from students and our own somewhat random process of reflection, we couldn't exactly prove that what we were doing was effective, but we were pretty sure that we were on to something. The graduation and college enrollment rates for students at the high school we were embedded in had shown significant improvements since we had come on the scene. Arne Duncan, then the head of Chicago Public Schools, had been urging us to begin sharing our program models with other schools, and we were starting to dip our toe in that water. As we began planning for organizational growth, we knew that we would need a person who could run programs well. But more than that, we needed someone who could model for other staff, someone who could set the bar, embody Umoja's principles and strategies of facilitation and relationship-building with students and adults - and could ultimately teach other staff how to do it, too.

"Magnanimous," Joe said when Umoja's Chief Operating Officer Ted asked him how his co-workers from jobs of the past would describe him. We were sitting in room 113 at Manley High School; I can picture the wooden chairs and the table with big wads of gum stuck under it like an art collage and Joe sitting opposite us. Ted and I did the thing where you exchange glances without actually looking at each other and raise your eyebrows without actually raising your eyebrows. Joe was wearing a suit jacket over khakis, and the suit jacket looked like it had hardly been worn before, maybe to a Bar Mitzvah or a wedding once. He was smart and earnest and a little sweaty, in a way that made him exceedingly likeable.

After the first interview with Joe, Ted and I contemplated a variety of possibilities. Joe might turn out to be one of those guys with a Ph.D. from an Ivy League school who wants to cut his chops by actually working among the common people, showing them, based on academic research, how it all should and could be done before he returns to the ivory tower to conduct more research. Or, we imagined, when we told him that the starting salary for the position was $35,000, he might start to laugh hysterically and walk out the door. We mused that Joe's wife, after seeing his wobbly desk in a converted classroom that he shared with 11 other Umoja-ites, might club him over the head and remind him he had lots of prestigious degrees and job offers from organizations with real furniture and office space. Finally, when we could let ourselves dream a little, we believed that Joe could be the person we had been searching for, someone who could help us take our organization to the next level of vision and leadership. We tried not to get too hopeful right away in our two-hour interview in room 113 – it was only a second date after all – but it was impossible not to see that he was one of us, and Ted and I both kept smiling after he left.

Looking back, except for Joe's magnanimous comment and his suit jacket (which is the same one he wore to my wedding), much of our first encounter is blurry to me now. Lately, I have found myself recreating moments of that interview so I can keep them as part of our shared past in a sacred and protected place. But it's a lie. I don't remember the details, only the essence. First of all, you should know he was right about the magnanimous thing. He was as magnanimous as anyone I have ever known. It seeped out of him, sometimes poured, from a place that was fed by instinct as well as by the deep abiding principles and the conscious commitment that followed them. Second, you should know that he was someone who gave precious and unique gifts to the organization that I founded and am devoted to, and for that alone he has VIP seating in my heart.

But it was more than that. He was my family in that very odd and instantaneous way that has to do with a shared Jewish, middle class upbringing and the exact same sibling dynamics. "You are SO my sister!" he would say every fifth conversation, if I hadn't already jumped in to say, "You sound exactly like my brother right now!" We shared a mutually recognized, completely and obnoxiously self-righteous

certainty that we should not have to accept the world on its own terms. We believed that if we were only loud and persistent enough, the world would have to change. Together, we were incapable of having a conversation that didn't include three tangents and two side bars and at least one of us shrieking and laughing – Joe with that great, never, ever to be forgotten belly laugh that was like a yowl and a laugh at the same time. That was the easy, lovely part of our relationship.

There were other parts that were a lot more challenging. There were some areas, not many, but they were wide enough to drive a truck through, where Joe and I fundamentally disagreed, not so much on core youth development principles but more on how to execute them. Joe was big on process and compassion and giving people lots of chances. I am not that way, partially because, as the head of an organization, I can't really be that way. The truth is, of course, that I run this organization because I am drawn, by nature, to overextended situations in which the particulars are trumped by grand truths. I was always pushing on big picture organizational truths, and Joe was eternally dragging me back to the story of one kid or one staff person. I wanted him to be tougher, harsher, and quicker to enact consequences. He wanted me to demonstrate through action that I truly understood that nothing we could do as an organization mattered more than creating moments of grace with students and staff. I wanted him to move away from his direct service work with students and into an almost full-time management role. He wanted Umoja to embrace his vision for creative expression as a critical tool of youth voice, youth activism, and academic growth, and to leave him alone to do really great program work.

We compromised for four and a half years, until we couldn't compromise anymore. During that time, in addition to mutual admiration and shared vision, there were also honest and tough conversations. Joe frequently came into my office with prepared remarks about why we needed to do something differently than how I thought we needed to do it, and after every one of these conversations, Ted and I would sit in awe and agree that Joe was a principled, integrity-filled, good faith negotiator. He believed what he believed and didn't want to give in until you were a believer too. They were some of the best difficult conversations I have had in my 12 years at Umoja. Here are two examples:

One spring, in a hurried vacuum, Ted and I had scoped out programs for the following year, including staffing for the programs. Ideally, the planning process should have been more inclusive, but we were stretched for time and capacity and had developed a plan which we thought was in the best interest of students and staff. When we rolled out that particular year's plan, Joe came back with a changed proposal: Turn one of the leadership programs into a writing program, incorporate more spoken word programming, give him a role that included more direct service and keep one of the interns who he was sure was going to be a star as a full-time employee. His counter-point was detailed, thorough, and he never hid his own self-interest during the negotiation process.

By leading with his bias toward getting as much direct service time as possible within his job, I didn't have to search for a hidden agenda. He introduced it and asked that it be acknowledged as important and then rolled out why his plan made sense for Umoja. It did in fact make sense, and Ted and I re-formulated our plans and came back with a Yes to just about all of his requests. Joe, without a doubt, was one of the people who helped me begin to really internalize the value of an inclusive process. He didn't just complain that things should be done differently; he showed up with a plan for how to do things differently. Truthfully, in my early years as an organizational leader, I thought of inclusivity as this thing you did so that everyone would understand why they needed to do things your way. The fact that Joe was willing to throw down with me in a respectful, intelligent, and challenging way pushed me to grow to the next level of maturity in my own leadership.

When it came time for Joe to leave Umoja to become a professor, he was excited about his new opportunity, tortured to think of leaving his Umoja family, mature and honest in his expression, and utterly thorough in creating a good transition. By that time in his tenure at Umoja, I had asked, cajoled and really pressured him to become a different kind of organizational leader than he wanted to be. He didn't want to become a not for profit organizational "big picture" guy, but I kept telling him he could be really good and effective in that role (which was true but wasn't the point at all). Our ongoing and reoccurring conversation went something like this:

> Me: Joe, it is so important that someone does the infrastructure stuff ...You know that deserves smart people too, right?
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> Joe: It does but it's just not me. That's just not what I want to do. It's not my passion.
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> Me: See, so you agree that we need smart people in those roles, right? We're getting somewhere.

The invisible movie audience would groan in unison at that point in our ongoing dialogue...Why can't she listen?

Joe knew who he was, and he didn't let me convince him otherwise. It wasn't until the spring before he died that I began to truly internalize the lesson of Joe's leaving: A good organizational leader presents opportunities for growth, holds up a mirror to a promising staff person to tell them where the organization has room for them to evolve to the next level, and then lets them decide if they want that and doesn't punish them if they don't. Before I started Umoja, after doing great work at a small youth agency for 7 years, my former boss ignored me for a month when I said I was leaving, even though I had given 3 months notice. That's just not fair. When I started Umoja, I swore I wouldn't ever be that guy.

But in fact, almost a year after Joe left Umoja, honest self reflection caught up with me, and I realized that in some ways I had been that guy with Joe. We were both in tough spots, and I see that clearly now. The organiza-

tion was too small for Joe to be a high level leader without giving up the direct service work that he loved and was so gifted at, the very thing that motivated him to do the work in the first place. But he did want to keep growing in the organization, and there really wasn't another way to make that happen. He was going to have to go eventually, but rather than coaching him and supporting him to identify how and when that would happen down the road, I continued to pressure him to want what I wanted him to want up until almost the very end of his time at Umoja. I was startled out of my resistance by the true grace with which he transitioned out of the organization and his clear, continued commitment to Umoja. In the end, Joe was smart enough to know that if Umoja was to continue growing, we needed the kind of leader that I had in mind, but he was also smart and wise enough to know that it wasn't him.

In his good-bye speech to staff, Joe told his colleagues that even though he wouldn't be working at Umoja anymore, he would still be an active part of our family. It was the kind of thing that people always say when they're leaving a job, and though they are usually well-intentioned when they say it, it very rarely comes true. However, in Joe's case, he wasn't kidding. He continued to keep in touch with all the young people who had been closest to him. He co-facilitated a weekly writing program at one of our partner schools, was actively mentoring several of his former staff members, and somehow convinced his new university to provide free space for Umoja's 6-week Upward Bound Summer Academy on their campus. Joe's attitude and his actions allowed him to transition out of employment at Umoja without making any students or adults feel like they were left behind. Joe couldn't help but model the world as he wanted it to be, even while balancing his own feelings of loss at leaving Umoja, his excitement about the challenge of being a professor, and the sleep deprivation and exaltation of becoming a new father. Joe Cytrynbaum was dedicated and committed. He was passionate and loud and gestured like he was performing in a Greek amphitheater. He was serious and hysterically funny. He was honest and real. And without a doubt, Joe was magnanimous. He was and he will always be Umoja Joe. Enough said.

So often, in the fast-moving, underfunded world of youth development, staff leave, and you think the organization will grind to a halt. But instead, a new energy emerges, people step up and step in, and the world goes on, changed but not necessarily diminished. This was true when Joe left; yet since that time the gifts he gave continue to circle back as uniquely his. There is still, there will always be a Joe-sized hole at Umoja. You could argue Joe's greatest impact, the legacy of Joe, is the students he touched. Every student who knew Joe believed they were his favorite, that he was dying to hear what they had to say next, and it was true every time. Their love for him and their grief over losing him is still volleyed back and forth through poems and Facebook postings on a regular basis. I joined Facebook just so I could read what they had to say and remember how right Ted and I had been in suspecting that Joe would be a guy who loved students right and who could teach other people how to do the same.

You could also easily argue that Joe's legacy as a supervisor and a mentor of new staff – most in their first grown-up jobs – is a gift from Joe that will keep on giving. Two of his staff who are still at Umoja now, Anna and Ilana, grew up as professionals under Joe. Both are smart and gifted and are destined for greatness no matter where they go, but the particular blend of greatness they bring has the mark of Joe all over it. There are no fewer than a dozen times each month where I look at them and remember them in their first year of employment, their first jobs out of college, young and white and solidly middle class in an entirely new cultural world navigating new systems and institutions and earnestly trying to soak it all in and understand it as fast as they could. Joe translated, and he brought compassion and intellectual rigor to his translation. They read articles together in their team and individual meetings; they talked about systems, and they talked about individual kids; they watched Joe in action, and watching him allowed them to find their own best versions of themselves.

Both Anna and Ilana have stepped into a new level of organizational leadership at Umoja this year, and my joy at watching their success is only tinged with sadness that Joe doesn't get to see them continue to evolve into women who will do right at Umoja and wherever else they choose to land in their lives. The legacy Joe left me personally is that I will not try to force a vision of Anna and Ilana's future, or anyone else's for that matter, into my vision of Umoja's future. I will offer up the opportunities Umoja has for their continued growth and hope like hell they take them. And I will support their transition to new things if that's what ultimately makes sense for them. I thank Joe for that.

And I thank Joe for reminding me that putting individuals first doesn't mean losing sight of great truths. There is room for both in this world and both can happen in the context of intellectual rigor. While it's still true that good youth development organizations need people who are willing to muck around in the world of funding and infrastructure, it is also true that Joe's unique style of leadership has left Umoja with programmatic direction that remains strong and with staff who know why they do what they do, why it works, and how to teach other people to do it too. Thanks to Joe, Umoja has a set of well defined leadership competencies that define success for our students but also provide a real recipe for staff as we design new programs now and in the future. That sort of organizational leadership is at the heart of Umoja's success.

I saw Joe at his son's first birthday party the week before he died, and we said we would get together over the summer. We reviewed several of the topics we had to cover with each other. "We have so much to talk about, we'll need to prepare an agenda," I said. Or maybe he said it; it was something we regularly said to each other. I had been mulling for several months what it was I wanted to communicate to him about our relationship vis-a-vis Umoja. We had easily transitioned into peers once we were no longer working together, but I wanted or needed just a little

more resolution about the previous incarnation of our relationship. There were lingering things I wanted to thank him for, apologize for, be witness to.

I wanted to let him know that I was still learning how to lead, and it was a messy business, and I was better now than I had been then. I also wanted to tell him that I had watched two of his staff leave recently, one for law school and one for international travel, after really successful tenures at Umoja; that they had both built a solid foundation for programs that will run based on their contributions for years to come. And the two who stayed, Anna and Ilana, were both poised to be the next generation of Umoja leadership, the ones who will get us to the next place, much as Joe got us to this one. I wanted to talk with him about all four of them, knowing how proud he was of them, how humbly and confidently he had coached them to the next steps in their life.

I can almost picture the conversation that didn't happen more easily than I can remember the first time I met Joe in his suit jacket. Our respective sons would have been crawling all over the place, and we would have talked about the things we both still wanted to do on behalf of young people in our lives . . . the things we felt we had to teach . . . and the things we still needed to learn. We would have interrupted each other, shrieked a little, and talked too loudly as we were apt to do. We never got the chance to have that conversation, and so I write my words here instead. It is less satisfying but no less true. It really mattered that Joe Cytrynbaum was at Umoja. For me, as a leader and as a woman deeply committed to educational justice, I am better for knowing Joe. Umoja is a far better and richer place for children and staff as a result of the gifts Joe gave. I think he knew that. I really, really hope he knew that.

In 1997, **Lila Leff** founded Umoja Student Development Corporation, which uses a school community partnership model she developed to work with Chicago's most challenged high schools. Previously, she co-founded and directed Illinois' first federally funded School-to-Work Initiative, EDGE/UP, to assist high poverty students to succeed in high school and effectively transition to post secondary training and education. She was a Leadership Greater Chicago fellow in 2001 and currently serves on the steering committee of the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research. She graduated with high honors from the State University of New York with a B.A. in liberal studies and a focus in English, theater, and psychology. In 2008, Lila was nominated and received a full scholarship from the HBS Club of Chicago to attend Harvard Business School's Strategic Perspectives in Nonprofit Management course. Lila has recently been selected to participate in the prestigious Global Emerging Leaders Fellowship Program through the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.