



Laney Whitcanack, Coro Fellow in Public Affairs, St. Louis, 1998.

I first heard about the Coro program when I was working for a nonprofit in Mexico City, Mexico after college. One of my friends sent me a letter about how she had gone through an eight hour interview process and had been accepted to Coro, a public affairs training program. She said that the interview was one of the most powerful learning experiences she'd ever had and that the program was perfect for me. As I researched Coro, I realized how relevant the organization was to my post-college work. At my small nonprofit, I had started to observe how no single sector stood on its own – we were dependent upon relationships with the government and the private sector to keep operating. In addition, I quickly realized that to be a leader in the nonprofit sector, I had to better understand the interdependencies among people working in different arenas.

Through the Fellows Program, I was given a set of real world skills which opened up a range of professional possibilities that I never knew existed. Coro's mix of field placements and training helped me realize that any system-- from the sewer system of St. Louis to the operations of a restaurant chain-- contains interesting challenges, structures, and people that I can explore and learn from. For my independent project, I organized a downtown block party for the city of St. Louis to watch the series finale of Seinfeld. We projected the show onto the side of a building and after seeing 5,000 people come from all over St. Louis to a neighborhood that was abandoned and empty most evenings, I realized that I had the ability to bring people together when I took risks and thought big. Equipped with an increased awareness of my own skills and the tools I learned in Coro, my professional life has taken the shape of an extended Coro experience.

While working for Coro in San Francisco in the late 1990s, I developed new training ideas and programs such as the Community Fellows program and the UCSF Faculty Leadership Collaborative. Additionally, after a discussion with one of the Exploring Leadership (EL) students, Kristi Smith Knutson (another Coro employee) and I were inspired to create The Princess Project (www.princessproject.org). The Coro team helped us along the way as our efforts to find a prom dress for one EL grad grew into a sustainable non-profit organization that provides thousands of Bay Area high school girls each year with free prom dresses and accessories. We would never have started The Princess Project without Coro's support. Board members, dress collectors, volunteers, and storage all came from the Coro community.

Currently, I am the co-founder of a community software company called Big Tent. The co-founder of the company, Nicholas Chim, was one of my fellows from The Community Fellows Program. He and I reconnected a couple of years ago and started thinking about ways to create a free online solution for trusted community groups to stay connected and organized. The result is a venture funded start-up company that is two years old and has fifteen employees, including four Coro graduates. Building a business has been an exciting challenge--different from building The Princess Project, different from leading programs at Coro, and different from working in government. The skills I learned in Coro, however, allowed me to navigate across sectors and continually help me to lead and learn wherever I am.