

CHAPTER 8

The Citizen Movement Expands

"The real measure of Ralph's success will be how many oak trees are planted."

— Claire Nader

It is a frequent complaint among Nader's critics that he is "spreading himself too thin" by founding so many advocacy groups and becoming involved in so many different issues. Yet that is precisely the measure by which Nader gauges his success: How many more people are becoming active citizens? How many new industries can be subjected to consumer-side pressure? How many government bodies can receive more probing public scrutiny? "I like to think of myself as a Johnny Appleseed, getting consumer groups started and letting them grow on their own," Nader has explained. One of the most important roles that Nader has fashioned for himself is as a catalyst, helping others to create their own citizen organizations. Funding and organizational structures have varied from one group to another, as might be expected, but they all share a commitment to citizen action in making government and business more accountable.

Part of the challenge that Nader and his early associates faced was inventing organizational models for citizen action that could be both financially viable and politically effective. In most cases, Nader provided critical seed money, organizers and his personal endorsement to new groups, and many went on to thrive as independent enterprises. (Appendix 1 provides a complete list of organizations that Nader has founded over the past twenty-five years.) Some of these fledgling advocacy groups would later close their doors, unable to develop a stable and sufficient funding base on their own. Apart from this common difficulty, many new groups also found it difficult to locate tenacious, creative leadership that could thrive in the arduous working circumstances of public-interest advocacy.

A question very much on Nader's mind in the early 1970s as he toured dozens of college campuses was how to devise a hardy, replicable model of citizen action. His appearances typically inspired huge turnouts and sometimes led to the formation of *ad hoc* groups of student activists. If the would-be Nader's Raiders had the enthusiasm, however, they often lacked the citizen action skills and access to standing institutional resources (professional staff, funding, administration, etc.). The person who would help Nader bridge the gap between aspiration and achievement turned out to be Donald K. Ross, the student body president of Fordham University in 1965.

After taking the New York bar exams in the summer of 1970, Ross journeyed down to Washington to join the first Public Interest Research Group, or PIRG. The dozen-odd members of this elite corps of Nader activists had each selected specific issues to work on. Having arrived