

LETTER TO EDITOR ON COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

SEPTEMBER 2008

Listening to Governor Sarah Palin and Mr. Rudy Guliani at the Republican Convention deride Barack Obama's background as a "community organizer" as less than valued work, seemed both smug and ignorant of this important and skilled profession. They demean the thousands of brave and trusted community organizers who serve, often for very meager wages, to ensure that citizens at our grassroots have a voice and role in decisions and issues that affect their lives, their communities, and our country.

Whether they are working to revitalize distressed neighborhoods, reduce crime and violence, clean-up environmental hazards, reclaim vacant property, support rural cooperatives to aid farmers and farm workers, ensure coordination of disaster assistance, engage youth in positive community activities, or conduct voter registration campaigns to reconnect citizens to our political process, community organizers are at the heart of our American democracy.

The legacy of community organizing is a vital one in America from Jane Addams and others in the Settlement House movement calling attention to and organizing citizens to press elected officials to address squalid urban conditions Progressive Era organizers who pressed for elimination of harsh child labor and for fair labor practices. Brave organizers struggled to gain women's right to vote and run for political office. Civil Rights in America didn't just happen; many community organizers risked more than just political insults and civil ignorance to earn true political and social parity for people of all races in America. Today, community working in our distressed neighborhoods to bring together diverse interests to rebuild houses, businesses, and jobs to improve the quality of life, even for the neediest among us? That is community organizing.

Maybe if Mr. Guiliani had looked closer, they would have recognized community organizers working behind the scenes to build stronger and safer neighborhoods as cornerstones for more secure homeland, as well as to help communities respond in disasters. Maybe if Governor Palin had vetted her speech more, she would have understood that the rights of and opportunities for our disabled citizens have long been a focal point of community organizers and parent activists who took it upon themselves to organize and learn how to organize to effectively gain access to resources and social inclusion, as well as to build strong national and local organizations to sustain this work.

Community organizing is part and parcel of the unique American democratic ability of private citizens to organize and respond to problems and issues in their communities and society. As an educator of community organizers – the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work has the first and longest standing professional community organizing program in the country – one fact I have learned about community organizers is that through their experience and skills over time, they often become wonderful leaders.

Community Organizers...stand up and be proud and be counted.

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What Exactly Is a Community Organizer?

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Barack Obama was a community organizer in Chicago for three years before he moved on to do somewhat different things. Sarah Palin was a small town mayor, a job she describes as “like an organizer, only with responsibilities.” So what exactly is a community organizer? From the brief descriptions most people have gotten through this election, you’d think it was a short-term job for young people, waiting around to grow up.

As a professor of community organizing at Hunter College School of Social Work over the last 35 years, for counterpoint I’d like to offer a few stories on who community organizers are, what they actually do, and what happens to them as they move from their twenties into later years. Perhaps when people find out, they’ll know a little bit more about who they want to occupy the White House.

First, the rosters of each year’s organizing class looks a little different from most others I teach: One of last year’s included a Korean-American interested in electoral activism; a Dominican-Filipina who was training in spirituality and healing as well as social justice; a young white guy from Oregon who once a month rides with the biking network that drives Police Commissioner Ray Kelly crazy; an immigrant from Belize who worked with American veterans in her field placement; a stylish senior activist who went back to school so people would listen to her more; and a leader of the youth fellowship in her Black church who thought she could make a difference in young teens’ lives. There also were students involved in the rights of the mentally ill, those with HIV-AIDS, and the developmentally disabled. And, yes, there were a couple who didn’t know what they’d gotten themselves into and will be happy later in life to organize their closets.

So students of community organizing start out looking as scruffy as young Obama did when he was an organizer; many have Palin’s same edge, minus not the lipstick but the designer suits. They arrive in class already engaged in issues a lot of us don’t think too much about: toiling with undocumented workers suffering from domestic violence; trying to get service providers to pay more attention to the isolated elderly; the LGBT kids of color living near the old piers off West Street. Living on student loans, many still manage to prepare lunches with strange green and brown colors, washed down with a non-Starbucks cup of coffee.

Of course, starting with fire in your belly is easy in your twenties, when there’s energy to burn and responsibilities, as Sarah Palin suggests, seem to be less than when a mortgage is hanging over your head. What happens to those young organizers ten or twenty years later? Maybe they started at the margins, but where are they now?

Rosita Romero came to her first organizing class quietly, never saying a word for the first month. However, when working in her small group on a community needs assessment of Washington Heights, her own neighborhood, she suddenly came alive, bringing a mix of Palin-like passion and Obama-esque clarity to her classmates as they struggled to make sense of demographic data and the strategic choices that emerged from them. Twenty years later, she is executive director of the Dominican Women’s Development Center located in that same neighborhood, still an advocate for Latina women in the areas of child welfare, domestic violence, and immigration.

Her story is a carbon copy—oops, a burned CD—like that of Patricia Eng, who, just as quiet and just as passionate, has spent those twenty years working with Asian-American women on the very same issues.

Rodney Fuller was never quiet inside class or out. A young African-American man with a great smile, firm handshake, and a compelling strategic sense that he confidently expressed often, Fuller was on the fast-track to human service executiveship when he graduated in the mid-nineties. Fuller became an executive director of a large community center in Connecticut at the same age Obama started organizing in Chicago and Palin joined the Wasilla PTA. Less than two years later he was back in New York, working for half the salary and twice the hours to co-create Fresh Youth Initiatives, an award-winning youth organization emphasizing youth leadership and civic projects. Still at it in 2008, he's now executive director of Art Start, an after school program focused on those parts of students' lives unrelated to testing: music, art, culture.

Eric Zachary, one of the last white kids growing up in Coney Island, was one of the most intense students in his class, aware of the racial slights and elitism that can creep into any classroom. Going on to become a union organizer for 1199, Zachary soon took his love of the grass roots back to the local community, starting a parent leadership program out of John Jay that has grown to be the city-wide Coalition for Educational Justice, the community-union collaborative that is a grass roots voice to Chancellor Joel Klein's reform agenda, pushing for more parent leadership and teacher mentoring as lynchpins to quality public education. Co-Director of the Annenberg Institute for Education and Social Policy, he's hard to get on the phone because he's either organizing with parents in NYC or helping set up similar groups in Washington, DC or Detroit.

So what exactly binds these four stories with those young organizers just starting out? It's pretty simple: if you are or have been a community organizer, your work flows from four core principles tied to your work:

1. People from the margins deserve a voice at the table, too.
2. Some problems that individuals have require collective solutions.
3. Diversity-- racial, gender and otherwise-- is an asset, not a burden.
4. Change for change's sake doesn't matter if it doesn't have a plan.

There's a fifth principle as well: If planned change is to make a difference, see points 1-3 above. In November, may the best organizer win. [HE DID!]

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LETTER SENT TO THE NY TIMES

Dear NY Times Editor:

Re Article: “Palin Assails Critics and Electrifies Party” September 4, 2008

Clearly Governor Palin and former Mayor Rudy Giuliani do not understand and do not respect the work of thousands of community organizers working in myriad urban neighborhoods and rural communities across this country. Their ridicule of this noble and honorable skilled profession that Barak Obama committed himself to after college is an affront to the millions of low income and working class people who are struggling to improve their conditions and better the lives of themselves and their neighbors. Community organizers have been unknown by much of the American public and now is the time to introduce the importance of their work to the American people. It is precisely because they work at the grassroots level behind the scenes that they are invisible to the media, many politicians and much of the public. Community organizers help bring ordinary people together to collectively problem-solve and strengthen their communities. Governors have the power and authority along with the responsibility to make decisions. Community organizers must be more skilled because they must persuade and influence others through democratic processes. They work across age, gender, racial and ethnicity and party lines with skill and dedication. They assist in improving housing, health care, schools, the environment, social services with the people. They build and support local leadership and help people create the kind of organizations that give invisible people a voice in the political process. Many community organizers receive training through organizations inside and outside academia that provide the knowledge, skills and strategies to make change. Schools of Social Work across this country like mine have been providing an education in this field to thousands of committed graduate students for almost a century. They work long hours with too low pay “in the trenches” to bring people out of poverty and despair, instill hope and opportunity, and create resources. They are the glue that keeps many communities from disintegrating and falling into despair and decay. To Sarah Palin, Rudy Giuliani, and John McCain, there are many ways to serve this country, to fight injustice and inequality, and to build a secure America. We should honor the work, dedication and competence of community organizers.

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