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Organizer's Edge ►

E-News For Social Justice Organizers

April 10, , 2013

Greetings!

Welcome to the **second** issue of the **Organizer's Edge**. We hope to provide a forum for a broad range of social justice organizers to look at what is at the "edge of our envelope" -- what other organizers are thinking about, trying to learn, what is working, what is not, and how we can be more effective. I hope you will take to time not only to read these pieces, but also get in touch with me and comment on them, so we can all move forward.

Electoral Politics and "Radical" Thinking -- MJB

Many years ago I was elected to a minor office in Vermont: Assistant ("Side") Judge of Rutland County which also included being one of a two County Administrators. We had a few hundred thousand dollar budget, oversaw the Country Court and County Jail and sat as judges, along with the Presiding Judge in Superior Court who had been appointed by the Governor. I had a four year term, stuck it out, and learned a few things along the way, including:

- Elected officials, even minor ones, make important decisions that affect the lives of many people. In our case, we appointed the first woman as County Clerk, who had an impact on many people over the thirty years she stayed in that role. She was the gate-keeper of the Court, providing, for example, better access for women who were victims of domestic violence. In the past, the (always male) Clerk was often reluctant to schedule these cases, which at least one male judge in the past had referred to as "junk days."
- Someone was going to make these decisions that this elected office made and it might as well be me or someone whose values I agreed with.

- Hardly anyone was watching what we were doing. No one, aside from the lawyers, ever came into the court to observe the proceedings or question what we were doing.
- As an elected official, it is easy to become corrupt. Because no one was watching, and we had more money and jobs than we had ever been in control of, it is easy to see how elected officials can slip into enriching themselves or their friends. For example, we had to fix the Courts aging chimney. I hired, with no competitive bidding, a friend who was a mason at a reasonable price, but no one would have noticed if the price had been higher. We got good value for the taxpayers' money: but was easy to see how the only thing stopping us from doing otherwise was our ethics. We had authority over hiring the various Assistant County Clerks. Even in a small town where many activities are out in the open, it would be so easy to hire someone we knew rather than the most competent person. It was easy to see how when officials have larger budgets and are more removed from public scrutiny, the temptation for corruption only grows. Aside from the lawyers who used the court as their private preserve, most people working 9-5 and had little chance to observe our activities. The one time a newspaper reporter showed up to ask a few questions, it was a big deal. The culture of the court, with all female clerks and all male lawyers and judges (during this time), only increased the closed nature of this preserve.

I left after my term was up and got my first (paid) job as a community organizer. The worlds of community organizing and electoral politics rarely inter-twined, except when the organizer would approach the elected officials for some decision. Rarely did those working on the "community" and "neighborhood" level directly get involved in electoral campaigns for public office or run for office. There were notable and important exceptions, but the overwhelming funding from foundations and tax-exempt 501 c-3 structure of the community organizations effectively kept the community organizations away from electoral politics. (See James Mumm article in the last Organizers Edge E -News for more on this).

Many have worked on both sides of community and electoral organizing, and this Organizers Edge features the thoughts of [Attica Scott](#), an organizer who recently was elected to the Louisville, KY Metro Council. I think her experience, thoughts and perspective will stimulate creative discussion and action on the part of organizers who are thinking about how we build power in new ways, in the "world as it is."

Steve Meacham, long-time organizer, now with [City Life/Vida Urbana](#) a 40 year-old community organization in Boston, reflects on what it means to organize and develop leaders. His thinking goes beyond Alinsky's idea of "rubbing raw the sores of discontent" and "individual self-interest," to how we think about and organize that "discontent..." From his experience, it is important not only to organize those who have "grievances" but lead people how to think about them, how we understand our society and what is right. Meacham points out that organizers need to re-think the morality of "the market" when it comes to housing - and other human necessities. His article is important for any organizer who is building an organization of people who have a "grievance."



Metro Councilwoman Attica Scott

Attica Scott, Organizer AND Elected Official



Attica Scott, of Louisville, KY, is the former Coordinator of Kentucky Jobs with Justice (JwJ) and a member of the Board of Directors of the National Organizers Alliance (NOA). She recently won election to the Louisville Metro Council, an elected legislative body of 26 members. She had previously run a campaign for School Board.

Attica comments on what she has learned about being both an organizer and an elected official.

Having run grassroots campaigns for the Board of Education and Metro Council, I find that the grass roots organizing tools that we have available need to be incorporated into our political campaigns and legislative work if we are to remain true to our base.

Metro Council is the legislative body for Louisville and all ordinances and resolutions around issues including public safety, union contracts, etc., come before us. My priority focus is on abandoned and vacant properties, in part because our District has the third largest number of such properties of all 26 districts.

I have remained connected to groups like the National Organizers Alliance because the work is important to me. NOA members have helped me to maintain connections to community organizing and I appreciate that support.

How did I get into elected office? While that is a long story, I will say that one of the benefits of Jobs with Justice (JwJ) as a national network is that they understand that we have to have activists and organizers in elected positions if we are going to transform our communities and our country. So, from day one JwJ was supportive; even though JwJ is a 501c3, people in the organization could support me as individuals.

I also received support from NOA and that spoke volumes. When I applied for the position on Metro Council in October 2011 (before being elected, when there was a vacancy), I had people who encouraged me to pursue the seat on Metro Council. I would be in communication with national staff of JwJ and they were encouraging because they understand that we have to have people like us in elected positions.

I received support from individuals who donated time and money to my campaign. Every \$5 and \$10 made a huge difference. But beyond the amount, the donation said that these are my peers and they support new and different leadership. I also had people who constantly encouraged me, saying, "You are here serving a community of people. So serving in the political arena is no different than organizing in the community." And they love to remind me that that this is not about me. We in community organizing are good at holding elected officials accountable. And I can appreciate being held accountable by people in our community.

So, how did I get here? In my election in 2012, with 5 other people on the ballot, I got 48% of the vote because we used old school and new school electoral techniques. I had an amazing group of volunteers, including youth and elders, and we knocked on doors for months. People got involved in ways that they could.

We get paid \$43,323 and our service is seen as a part-time position. I currently teach at Jefferson Community and Technical College as an Adjunct Instructor, which is an extremely rewarding privilege.

I have to spend a lot of time on the road and spend a lot of money on gas driving all over District 1 on a daily basis. There are more than 27,000 people in District 1 and I try to attend as many neighborhood meetings, homeowners meetings, speaking at school events, etc., as possible.

I maintain strong relationships with the organizations that I have historically partnered with, including Kentucky Jobs with Justice, Network Center for Community Change, Fairness Campaign, Highlander Center just to name a few.

I strongly encourage people to build relationship with their elected officials at the local level. We often overlook local and state politics, but these impact us every day. Call your council person, your state rep and request a 30-minute meeting and share your ideas and concerns and how they can support your organization.

Make sure that you are communicating with your representatives so that when you go before them you are known and seen as legitimate and your organization is seen as having a strong base of support. Consider asking elected officials to serve on your board of directors. These are not folks to put on a pedestal and please do not put me on a pedestal.

People should expect us to be, and we need people to hold us, accountable to engaging folks in community in the public policy process. If they [elected officials] are using social media tools - Facebook, Twitter, etc.

- people should hold us accountable on those sites. Send us questions on Twitter and post on our FB page. Those tools should be community engagement tools and you should expect us to use them as such. And while I am now a part of government, I am not of government. I am an activist who is also a politician and I am committed to educating people about the issues that I am working on and I am committed to encouraging active civic engagement in the political process. You can follow Councilwoman Scott on twitter at @CW_AtticaScott.



"Radical" Organizing

by Steve Meacham (above with grandchild)

City Life describes itself as a radical, base-building group. How do these two terms - "radical" and "base-building" - intersect? Why is this intersection vital, especially in this political moment?

City Life has a radical analysis critical of capitalism, in particular how various oppressions based on class, race and gender are connected through capitalism. This systemic critique informs our local organizing and also connects it to movements around the world. When our members see millions protesting in Greece or Egypt, they ask themselves, "How do we get to that level of resistance?"

Some would argue that this kind of radical analysis will marginalize us. That is not our experience. City Life has been the main sponsor of a series of gatherings over the last dozen years called Radical Organizing Conferences. Our members come out but so do many organizers and activists who want to connect their work to long term change.

We deliberately leave the meaning of "radical" somewhat loose to allow maximum participation. The description of "radical" we have used at the conferences is that we want to solve the problem of the person walking through the door (1) in a practical, immediate way, but also (2) in a way that undermines the system that caused the problem.

For City Life's 40 years, a major focus of our work has been to stop forced displacement. This displacement has generally been the result of real estate corporations or banks operating in line with what they see as the market principles of capitalism - speculating and pushing up housing

prices as high as the market will bear. It is almost impossible to oppose that displacement without consciously rejecting the market principles. In a hot housing market, investors will buy older buildings and dramatically raise rents. How can we fight those increases, how can we protect peoples' homes if we accept that "the fair rent is the market rent?" How can we hope to win a battle with the investor if we accept that "he can do what he wants with his property because he owns it?" How can we win small owners to our side in such fights if we don't explain that different forms of property come with different obligations and limitations. During the bank crisis, City Life early on built a large movement by fighting for "principal reduction", lowering the mortgage amount owed to the bank to current value. The fight for principal reduction is heating up and the demand has achieved some mainstream approval, but six years ago it was a left wing idea. We fought for it because we understood that the housing bubble was a deliberate creation of the financial system and was itself the source of predatory lending. That bubble was a direct response to the growing income and wealth gap in today's capitalism. Therefore, when the bubble burst, the author's of the bubble - Wall St. Banks - should pay to resolve the crisis.

Our experience of having a radical analysis is that it opens up moral space for new kinds of resistance. After all, if you want to organize, it's not enough to have a grievance. It's not enough to know you've been hurt by powerful actors. You also need a sense of righteousness, an understanding that you have been unjustly wronged in a way experienced by many others. It's also necessary to feel you have the power to correct the wrong.

This is the connection to "base-building". When members of our constituency are under attack by banks or real estate corporations, it is vital to organize those directly affected. Organizing allies is fine, but there must be formations of those directly affected.

In the fight against foreclosures and bank evictions over the last 6 years, that formation has been the "Bank Tenant Association." For 3 years, roughly 80-100 people have been coming to our meetings each week. They come to deal with their "case". Although City Life provides technical assistance, and lawyers attending the meeting provide legal advice, the meeting is really about building solidarity, community and action. There are many rituals repeated in different ways in each meeting that are designed to overcome individual shame and isolation.

The banks are implacable foes. They don't want to negotiate. They just want mass eviction. They even seem to be initiating a new housing bubble. As people are exposed to a wide variety of methods of resistance City Life has developed, they accept the need for militant protest. People engage in protest activity for the first time. Some get arrested in civil disobedience for the first time.

The victories won by this activity and, more important, the consciousness generated about the rightness of the fight, has allowed the movement to continue to grow. The Boston Bank Tenant Association has now "budded off" to form new groups in Brockton, Quincy and Northside (northern suburbs). Other groups in New England have organized 10 bank tenant association type formations.

Out of all this activity has emerged a growing cadre of incredibly courageous and sophisticated leaders. They come to several meetings each week, lead actions, and attend courses on radical organizing. In the process they are building a new community of love and struggle, built on a

timeless adage that we read at each meeting - "we are each others' keepers."

We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, YOUR edge of YOUR envelope. Just go to... <http://michaeljacobybrown.com/contact/>

Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Heather Booth, founder of the Mid-West Academy,
Roger Newell with the Teamsters Union and Jobs with Justice in Washington, DC,,
George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,
Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,
Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,
Cesar McDowell of the Interaction Institute for Social Justice,
Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,
David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,
Linda Honold, of Wisconsin Voices
Quinn Rallings in Alabama with the PICO Network,
Bob Van Meter with the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Boston,
Walter Davis, in Tennessee, of the National Organizers Alliance,
Deb Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,
Cherie Andes, of the Industrial Areas Foundation,
Avi Green, with MassVote,
Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,
Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,
Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,
Claudia Horwitz, of Stone Circles in North Carolina,
Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles
Fred Azcarate, of the AFL-CIO
 and others, hopefully, including YOU

Other Useful Links

<http://michaeljacobybrown.com/>
[National Organizers Alliance](#)
[Road Map Consulting,](#)
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