

We Make Change

**Community Organizers
Talk About What They Do—
and Why**

Kristin Layng Szakos and Joe Szakos

With an introduction by Harry C. Boyte

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To our parents, Judith Layng, Tony Layng, and Andy and Emma Szakos, who launched us on our way, and to our children, Anna and Maria Szakos, and foster daughters Tai, Toni, and Sherieka, who are the reason we do this work.

consciousness and crafting it together—what it means to craft an alternative world view. In figuring out what are the ways you struggle with folks over that in a principled way.

A community organizer to me—and I know that there are very different definitions out there—but it's someone who has the ability to connect and motivate folks to come together and has the skills to lead a process by which people can come to agreement on something. It's about bringing people together to address the problems that the community experiences and the root causes of those problems, and then moving to a collective plan of action.

I've had several reactions, actually, when I say I'm a community organizer. I had one person say to me, "Oh, you must have really clean closets." I just tell folks it's about bringing communities together, about solving problems in that community and putting forward a proactive vision of what folks want to see happen in our communities and neighborhoods. It's about being able to affect the decisions that are made that impact that community.

Now, granted, you can play a lot of roles in the movement and not be a community organizer, and I do believe that what we need is a movement that really has places and niches and roles for everybody, so long as we agree on a vision and a strategy. There have been times in my life when I've done something that was one step removed—I was a trainer and facilitator working with community groups for a while, or I tried to venture for a little bit into being a researcher to support organizing—and every time that I did that, I just felt too removed, even though it was just one step removed, that wasn't what I wanted to do.

It's about seeing that spark that happens in people's eyes when you realize that something is possible, when you see someone just move from a place of "That's just the way it is, what can we do about it?" to "OK. Let's do something." Not only that but "It's wrong, and we need to do something about it." It's about seeing those small moments of transformation and that's what drives me. It's that moment that makes everything worth it.

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Changing Lives While Making Change

We asked the organizers to share stories of their proudest achievements in organizing. Many told stories of issue victories—battles won, laws passed, communities protected. But just as often, their stories told of more personal victories—the transformation of individual lives. Leadership development is central to organizing enables people to effect change, and sometimes—not surprisingly—the biggest change comes in the people themselves.

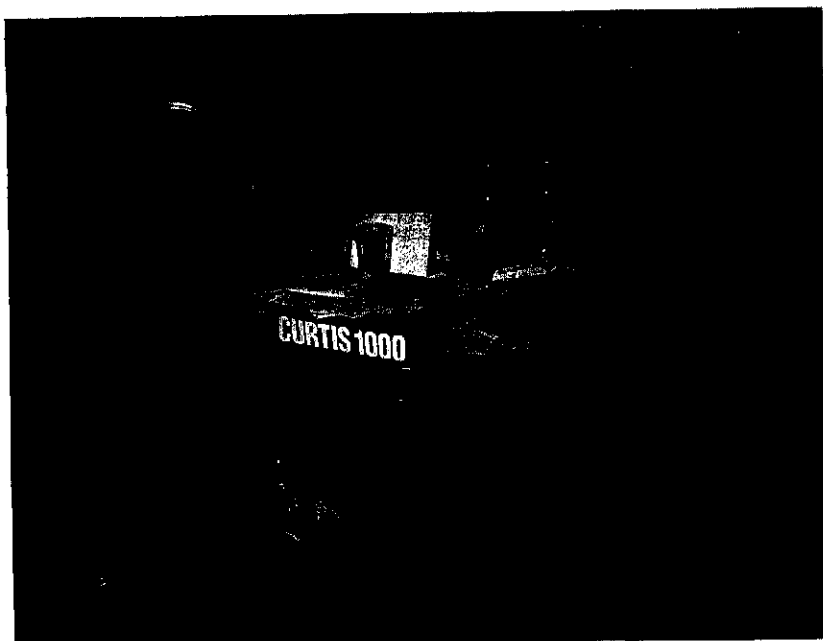
Transforming individuals

Individual transformations happen when people find power in working together on issues that affect their lives. Sometimes those transformations are sudden and life-changing.

Proudest achievement? Art Stevens, Carol Frederick, Janie Hynes. If you met them and saw the fire in their eyes, you'd see that they get it. I had hand in that and that makes me really proud. I guess I've saved and been a part of saving some land from some destructive practice and all that is great. I'm also proud of that, but it seems that the threat is always out there and that we've only saved it for a little while. When I look at Art or Carol or Janie, that's something that's going to last a lifetime for them. And so I guess there's a permanence there that makes me proud.

—Matt Sura

One of the things that makes me really proud is seeing someone that I've recruited, either into membership or into leadership in our organization blossom and discover their true gifts as a leader, and put those into the service of the campaign. There are some excellent examples of that within our organization right now. Standing and watching them give testimony to the press, or lead a meeting, or come in with a fistful of members of people they've gone out and recruited—nothing could make me happier.



People find power in working together. They focus on their common goals rather than their individual problems, and have a lot of fun in the process. A local phone-a-thon gives members a chance to do something concrete to help the organization.

than that. And that's about building power. Because building power entails building leadership.

—Mark Trechock

I think I'm proudest of the internship program, where we actually teach public housing residents community organizing skills and leadership development skills. Right before I was hired, PHAR [Public Housing Association of Residents] got a grant to hire residents for five to ten hours a week for six months, for a living wage of ten dollars an hour, to learn community organizing and leadership development. This organization is about helping residents have a voice and to use that voice—for them to be able to use their voices and learn their rights, and change things. Because they're so used to feeling like they don't have any power. Lots of feelings of hopelessness. To see residents become empowered and start to get involved in the change is pretty remarkable.

Not everyone who comes to the internship program will stay involved with PHAR, per se, but they might stay leaders in their community. That's already happened. We have one resident that moved out of public housing shortly after completing the internship program, but now serves on the

board of a local social service agency. So now you have one seat on board filled by someone who's felt and knows what it's like to be low income; who's now setting the policy for a social service agency.

—Holly Hatcher

One thing that I'm proud about is all the people who've become leaders over the years in our organizations, and seeing them move from a disinterest to becoming interested in other issues, and understanding everything is connected. It does my heart good to work with these leaders and see them do a television interview for the first time, or speak at a hearing, or lobby at the state legislature.

—Kevin Williams

Alabama Arise is a coalition of 150 mostly church but also civic and community groups. We work on poverty issues in the state of Alabama. Each year the membership selects priority issues that we're going to bring at the legislature. . . . I think the real excitement is when you talk to people and they make the connection; they get it. They become involved. We tell stories of people who previously had not thought about doing any of this kind of work. Because they had a chance to work with you, they say, 'yeah. I'm willing to do this, this, and this.' That's good.

—Presdalene Harris

During our third year of organizing we had heard a lot of people talking about living in deplorable rental housing conditions in our city [Springfield, Ohio]. There are a lot of older homes and they just weren't being kept up to code. We were hearing different people talk about living in houses that had holes in the floor. People were living without any running water or backed-up sewage coming up in their yard. They would complain to the landlords and would be evicted. Or they wouldn't complain out of fear of being evicted. They would try to go to the city, but there was no systematic place for them to try to hold those individuals accountable.

JAM [Justice Action Mercy] was working with a core group of people including some who had been living in some of these poor housing conditions. Folks were uncertain at first. They'd say, "I don't have a lot of money. There's nowhere else for me to go. This is it. I don't want to rent a boat and be without a home." But they gained confidence after doing some research and learning that there were other communities that had had the same problems and that different groups had put together plans to make a decision-makers put in place rental registration and inspection processes. Our leaders began to say, "If other people are doing this, why can't we? They really got fired up about it, saying, 'It's not that we can't do it. Our community leaders have just chosen not to do it. They've turned a blind eye to this problem.'"

We had one woman, Vanessa. Her house didn't have heat. There was a hole in her roof, so when it rained her living room got soaked. Her pro-

owner would not fix it. Vanessa got up at the action assembly in front of 600 people and she told her story. She looked at the county commissioners and she told them, "I'm holding you accountable to make sure this happens to no one else." At first, Vanessa didn't want to do that. She didn't want to be on the committee when we first started. She didn't want to let her story be known. She didn't want to be evicted. By the time we got to the action three months later, she was up in front of 600 with media and county commissioners, telling them, "I want you to change this. I want you to enact this new legislation that will give us rental inspections and registration in our city to hold irresponsible landlords accountable."

—Makiva Harper

I really like to see members go up the leadership ladder, see members really become good leaders. That's my favorite part, I think. I had one student when I worked for MASSPIRG [Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group] and she was kind of quiet, and she joined, and she was real passionate about people needing to vote. We had this youth vote campaign, working to get more youth voting and involved in the process so that they're not overlooked. And she really got involved, and started going to the board meetings and got involved with the campaign. I liked that a lot.

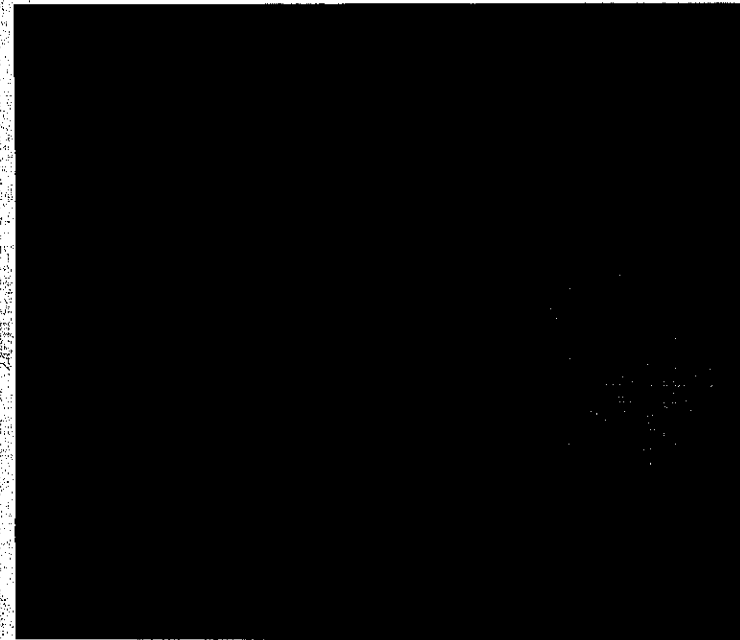
—Tiffany Hartung

The summer before last we had summer workers, and we had an intern over them. They were going to do the voter registration. There was one young lady who was terribly quiet and shy. The intern was like, "Well, we need to send her back." I was like, "No, you don't want to send her back. We want to help her overcome this." By the end of the summer she was one of our top producers because she was able to overcome her shyness. That's one of the things that I personally take pride in.

—Steve Bradberry

We just did a training in Grand Junction [Colorado]. Every year we do this four-day Principles of Community Organizers training with new leaders, new organizers. Every time I do this training I am proud of how much we can help people put in context issues of power and their own ability to see that they have skills. They have talents that, if they think about how to develop them, they can use to become leaders. I know this fellow from Native Action on the Northern Cheyenne, Tom Mexican Cheyenne. I can remember him coming to our trainings as a quiet, shy person, very little confidence about what he thought he could do. Seeing Tom Mexican Cheyenne stand up at a hearing down at Lame Deer one month after our training and deliver one of the most powerful pieces of testimony about why these coal companies shouldn't be here and just be this incredible voice of leadership—I mean those are things that you look for every week.

—Patrick Sweeney



Community organizers meet with people one-to-one, in small meetings, and in lots of other settings. Through the process, many individual lives are transformed.

We've been working with some young people, and I'm proud just to see them as they've developed, as young leaders—to see how much they've grown. Literally how they've grown, you know, physically. Because a lot of them were known since they were children, and now they're teens and young adults. And so I think [those are some] of my proudest moments, seeing them at a meeting with the mayor or giving a presentation to another group of people. Or watching how they interact with one another. Different than when they were children, that, where you can see the fruits of the investment of time and resources.

—Robby Rodriguez

On one level it's just watching one of our youth group members who was just a kid become an organizer, and other members really stepping up to the plate, being elected to the board of directors and doing a lot of work. I find it very fulfilling to see these young folks stepping up and doing the work, knowing that in some cases they're the children of current members or former leaders. We're making generational change. I told some of them at the high school that they have to take my job. They can go to the university, they've got one year to screw around, and then they've got to come back and take my job and let me retire.

—Jon Liss

I helped start a youth chapter called WE CAN. We have eight different chapters in our organization, and each chapter chooses its own issues. We never had one for younger people, and that was something that I wanted to do when I first got involved. So I worked with a friend of mine at the college and together we created a youth chapter that was college and high school students. They chose their name. They drew their logo. They chose their campaign and did a campaign plan. They went to Washington, D.C. The first year was just amazing. They were just on fire, and they recruited more and more students. Some of them changed their career plans. I've given letters of reference to some of them. They just blossomed. There's one kid who was particularly awkward, and the other kids took him under their wing. He just changed so much. They did a press event. They put on a big event, Earth Day, with two thousand people in attendance. They were just amazing. So I was very proud of that.

—DeAnna Woolston

Building bridges

Transformation often comes as a result of crossing into new territories—working with different kinds of people, discovering common interests with folks who used to seem foreign. Good organizing helps people bridge the gaps that keep them apart; only by working together can we effect real change.

The kickoff of my first affiliate, the Laramie Resource Council, was quite a moment because I remember the very first organizing meeting that I walked into with them. Right before the meeting I called my husband because I was scared to death. I had someone from the Peace and Justice movement, I had the wife of an Air Force colonel, I had a former Air Force sergeant who was very, very conservative but who really cared about the issues that we were working on. I had a vegetarian and a beef-grower. My husband said, "You sound upset," and I said, "I just don't think this is going to work." Well, I went in and they worked together. They were a great team. So the kickoff of that was really tremendous.

—Vickie Goodwin

When I first came to Lexington, the chapter was maybe five or six people mainly working on environmental issues. It was some older, White men, a couple of college students, and Janet Tucker. That was the chapter. When I would talk to Janet she would tell me that she's really passionate about racial justice and economic justice, which in many ways are the same thing. She would talk to me about her vision and what she wanted to do with the chapter and what she wanted to do with KFTC [Kentuckians For The Commonwealth] and where she wanted it to go. What she was doing at the time was facilitating the meetings—which she hates doing—and pulling the

agendas together. She was doing all the grunt work to make sure the was sustained. She wasn't doing anything that was really feeding what was truly passionate about. Those things weren't what she really wanted to be doing.

Fast-forward to where we are today. We had a chapter meeting Thursday before we came here. There were thirty people. One of our membership coordinators is a person of color, an African-American. two-thirds of the people who came to the chapter meeting were young people, college students as well as younger youth. We had people from community, like transit workers. It was just an incredible mix. We've three work teams in the chapter—environmental justice, economic justice and anti-discrimination—in addition to the fundraising, publicity, and membership committees. All of those committees are working on its campaigns and projects. It's an amazing transformation.

—Leah Ottersbach



Community organizing crosses the boundaries between races, ages and assumptions as people together for change. People across the nation came out to support the Immigrant Freedom Ride 2004.

I think it's the collective of leaders that are forging this effort in a very godforsaken part of this country, in northern and central Louisiana. In a very brief period of time in Monroe, Louisiana, Ouachita Parish, a place that David Duke carried twice, we have built a team of African-Americans, Whites, Asians, and others who want a community where we can struggle together to seek the common good.

We are at the center of political life in this city. We've done it with a deliberate attempt to cross, particularly, race and religion. You do that because there is a group of people that have an appetite for it and are willing to develop relationships that will sustain them. This work has expanded into northwest and central Louisiana. In each place we have developed a team of leaders who own the effort. These are people that three years ago would not believe they could shape decisions of community life but today they are coming to believe they can.

We had this assembly a few weeks ago where the Republican candidate for governor—who may very well be governor—came to our event. We were not concentrating on gubernatorial issues. We were concentrating on local concerns. In a period of (in terms of active work) two and a half years we were enough on the radar screen to get a guy that had been courting and was the darling of the religious right. He understood that it was a serious group and it was a group that really did want a relationship with him and took him seriously enough to pursue him. His coming wasn't an issue.

—Perry Perkins

I remember when the Lynchburg chapter came to the VOP [Virginia Organizing Project] board to petition for chapter status. Gene Tweedy is an extraordinary person. He's African-American, in his early thirties. He grew up in Lynchburg in the most notorious subsidized housing complex in the city. Tweedy was a juvenile probation officer. He describes himself as being able to straddle two worlds—the world of supposed law and order and the world of his street background and all that that entails. So he's a great guy. But in terms of gender, sexuality, and stuff like that he's fairly conservative.

So he's sitting at this table beside Jamie Michelle, who is a transgendered male-to-female, postoperative. She's the board representative from Virginians for Justice, which is the state gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender lobby group. I could tell that Tweedy was totally freaked out by being that close to her. Nevertheless, they had this really fabulous conversation. I think they probably learned a lot from each other. That was exciting, to see people who were so totally different interacting in a way that they felt like they were on the same side. They felt like they were joined together, working for something.

—Ben Thacker-Gwaltney

One of the experiences that always comes to mind that was one of those moments where I just felt like, "Wow, this really does change people," was when we had a member who was doing a lot of work on a landfill waste-

related issue. A lot of our members are fairly conservative; they come from small towns. We have people come to Washington who have never been on an airplane before, they've never eaten seafood before, they've never been in an ethnic restaurant, they've never been in a big city, they've never done lots of things. And so it's really a first for a lot of people, and I think it's overwhelming in lots of ways, just the culture shock, being in Washington.

There was this one woman who came to town for a fly-in (which is a citizen lobby trip) and was working on a local landfill issue, and got in to try to get legislation to give states and localities more control. She was an extremely conservative person, socially, and one of the things that I really enjoyed was during that fly-in was the day that the Supreme Court struck down the Colorado anti-gay initiative, and the entire D.C. gay community was out celebrating. She had gone with a friend to visit this friend's father who was on the fly-in, and was caught in the middle of that on the subway. I remember the next day hearing the two of them talk about it to the other conservative ranch women, and how the incredible humanity of it struck them. I remember thinking, wow, that her experience through WORC [Western Organization of Resource Councils] with these fly-ins had just in this very unexpected way completely changed who she was and her openness to people, and what their basic rights were. And her sort of willingness to open her eyes more and be a bit more understanding, and in a very peculiar way it was one of those times where I thought, "This is very worthwhile work to be doing."

—Sara Kendall

Transforming communities

And it's not just individuals who experience transformation in organizing; whole communities can change when they see the power of their collective voice.

What makes me feel good is bringing in people from the community to become organizers, people who have been oppressed by those in power. We see them as inferior. (In this border region, this usually translates into Mexican American and Mexican cultural, political, and economic clashes.) Mexican immigrants and their U.S.-born children have been able to develop an confidence about themselves and about who they are in their communities. They are able to understand that they do have a power to negotiate with the powers that be; in this case, it's the farmers negotiating with the Wall Street population. It's when people understand that they can make changes. They can call the county commissioner. They can call their representative or senator and get attention.

—Diana Bustamante

One of my proudest achievements would certainly be the work I did in 1995, 1996, and 1997 with a group of women in Prestonsburg, Kentucky.

who were receiving public assistance and were watching as it began to be clear that federal welfare laws were going to change. They began to get involved at a very local level, a state level, and a national level. And that group of women involved folks who had never taken a step out of their front door without asking someone's permission. Suddenly, they found themselves leading the state, playing roles on a national level that they never imagined. The personal transformation in a very broad base of people was extraordinary. They were also able to do some interesting policy work at the state level and got the state to invest much, much more in opportunities for education for low-income parents on public assistance. So that set of experiences over those three years was very intense work. I would say that ninety percent of the group of women that I was working with were survivors of domestic violence experiences and so for them it was just a time of liberation and discovery on many, many fronts.

It's also one of my greatest disappointments to look at that group five years later and see what's happened to folks and how just devastating it is to not have resources or any support system in your life. So some folks have been able to overcome incredible odds, but many, many folks have found themselves back in very dire economic straits, family straits. So while I hold that as my source of greatest pride, it also has a tremendous amount of pain when you realize even with the extraordinary sense of confidence that people gained and real significant, tangible policy changes that they were able to win, in many cases it wasn't enough to make a difference in their own personal situations.

—Lisa Abbott

I've been at this for so little time that I don't feel like I have any achievements per se, but I think I'll feel a lot of satisfaction from seeing the organizing committee that I'm working with kick off its own local chapter. Being a part of starting a local chapter will be really satisfying. Seeing people get turned on to how they can have an impact or get excited about being part of a group that is trying to take action to make positive change. I think that's something that has been satisfying to me—seeing folks get excited and start to take charge, wanting to do things themselves and not looking so much to the organizer to start things. And there are times when for whatever reasons—preparation, subject matter—a meeting goes really well. It's really nice to be at the end of what feels like a good meeting, a successful meeting.

—Brett Kever

I remember when in 1999 I started organizing the community in Culmore, it was so hard at the beginning. And then, a year later, when we did the evaluation, all these people really worked. At the beginning they weren't too comfortable with us as an organization, because there were a lot of individuals that would come there and lie to them . . . but when we did



Low-income people take to the streets to demand adequate health care services for the community in Washington, D.C.

the evaluation, they said, "Well, we have learned how not to be afraid, we learned how to get along with the children, how to speak to others, we learned other things that were going on in the county." And when we start listening to positive things coming from the community that was at the beginning, rejecting you, not as an individual but as an organization, it makes you feel very proud. It made me feel very good.

—Edgar Rivera

There were some people in a small community that wanted us to help. The water in the nearby river was being diverted into non-existence was, and is, a very, very small community, maybe 100 people. I was meeting was in the firehouse, so I went looking for the firehouse. It took me a while to realize that the firehouse was somebody's two-door garage.

Inside, there were two fire engines and people sitting on chairs and stools. There was just enough room between the door and the fire engines for the chairs. The people had brought little homemade snacks and coffee and tea. I'm looking at all these blank faces looking at me. I tell them what's possible. I tell them they have a right to put up a fight and there are tools they can use to win the fight. Faces start to light up. I continue with my presentation, detailing the possibilities, and I hang around for another two hours, talking to different individuals, hearing their stories and figuring things out. I remember that night vividly because of the hope in people's faces. There was something to be done and they did it.

—Brian Shields

When I started in Austin, I inherited a school strategy where we were working with around fifteen schools to try to improve the quality of education and to organize for after-school programs. I worked to put together a collective of principals. I got the principals from each of the schools meeting on a monthly basis, and got one of the key principals, Al Mindez-Melton, to be a leader. He was getting bored. So he began thinking about applying for an area superintendent job. I went after him about that: "Why do you want to be an area superintendent? Why do you want to enter administration? What are you going to be giving up by leaving your school?" And then proposed to him to take that same kind of a leadership position with respect to the other fifteen schools in this network. I said, "Look, I want you to be the volunteer area superintendent for the fifteen schools we're working with, so that you would become the mentor of these other principals. You would become their superintendent, although you wouldn't have the bureaucratic power; as a leader, you would connect with their interests and they would follow you." So I did that meeting with him, and then we began working together putting together this principals' collective. They met on a monthly basis. They started collaborating with each other and they put together their own staff development day, where all of their staff, like 900 folks, came together and they identified their best teachers and asked them to put on workshops.

Then they started running actions on the district. Their schools began putting together their own agenda for what they needed out of the budget. When budget time came around, they would have 150 parents at the school board. Class size was one of the issues. Fifth grade classes were way too big, so they made that one of their issues, and got the district to assign more teachers. They wanted a special science program, so there was an action where they had 150 parents there and got the school district to make that commitment.

That's the achievement that I'm proudest of because I think I did the best organizing. I built a leadership collective that really had a life of its own. The principals began to mentor one another and take responsibility for the strategy, and they began developing these great leadership delegations on their campuses, and then they were winning all kinds of issues, left and

right. They got to where, if there was something going on at the city office that they didn't like, they would set a meeting with, like, the coordinator, and would just scare the crap out of them.

—Allen Cooper

When we put together ICARE [Interchurch Coalition for Action, Reconciliation, and Empowerment] in Jacksonville, we spent about a year and a half laying the groundwork. I did one-to-ones with over 100 people. Out of that group, about thirty-five came together about four or five months later and began to form this organization. Then they identified lay people who started doing one-to-one visits with others in their congregations to listen for their concerns and visions. Then we identified those issues and researched those issues.

So we went for about a year before we went public. In February we held our first public meeting. We invited the mayor, the sheriff, the school superintendent to that meeting. We had about 750 people at a Spring Baptist Church. We packed the place. The sheriff showed up and gave us everything we wanted. We applauded him loudly. Then the school superintendent stood up. He said, "I will work with you. We will create an in-school suspension program. We're going to figure out the literacy challenge." The place again erupted in applause.

The mayor had chosen not to come. He sent a lowly representative. Our host pastor said, "Mr. Salem, are you here with the authority to speak on behalf of the mayor?" Mr. Salem said, "Yes, I am." Then he said, "Wow, that's wonderful. Now will the mayor do this and this?" Mr. Salem said, "I can't speak on behalf of the mayor. I'll have to speak to him tomorrow at the staff meeting." Our host pastor said, "Wait a minute. I thought you were speaking on behalf of the mayor."

The whole place erupted. The meeting went too late that night to get into the next day's paper, but the headline two days later was "Mayor Doesn't Show." The very next morning he called to apologize profusely to our two co-chairs. He was quoted in the newspaper as saying, "I should have been there." Then three weeks later we had a follow-up meeting. We had about 100 of our leaders in the basement of one of the churches to meet with the mayor. The mayor brought eighteen of his staff people to that meeting. The head of Public Works was there as well as the head of Parks and Rec. It was, "What can I do for you?" Our leaders were just thrilled.

If you have something like that happen, there is such energy in the organization. They are flying high and the sky is the limit. You're doing it in the context of people who have been told, forever and ever, "You don't matter."

—Paul Cromwell

Profile: Guillermo Quinteros

Urban Organizing in the Northeast



Guillermo Quinteros was the Executive Director of the Commonwealth Education Project/Commonwealth Coalition in Boston when he was interviewed in September 2003.

My father is from Peru. My mother is from Puerto Rico. The way that they met was that my mother won a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Peru. At that time Puerto Rico had been a colony for close to 100 years. When my mom grew up in Puerto Rico, there was almost no connection with the rest of Latin America. That was done on purpose.

Growing up she was very interested in trying to connect to the rest of Latin America. It was also a political statement. It was a nationalistic pro-independence statement. She wanted to study anthropology, so she ended up in Peru, where she met my father, who was also in anthropology.

I grew up as a child in Peru until I was twelve years old. During that time both my parents (especially my father) were very involved in university teaching. There was also a tradition in which the university was very engaged politically, especially with the unions and the shantytowns. It was very politicized and my parents were very involved.

When there was a military coup, we were on vacation. My mother and my siblings and I were on vacation in Puerto Rico, visiting my grandparents. After the coup my father was fired from the university. We could not return, but neither could my father come to Puerto Rico. My father ended up getting a job organizing a Latin American school of social work in Honduras. My father saw the map. Honduras and Puerto Rico—they are relatively close. So after almost seven months of not seeing my father, of not knowing what was going to happen, we ended up in Honduras. This was at the time, also, that the Nicaraguan revolution against Somoza was at its peak. We spent two years there. During that time the Sandinista revolution won, but Honduras also became the center of the American intervention.

People were thinking there was going to be an expansion of the

revolution, so Honduras became militarized. We ended up moving to Mexico, which at that time had a very liberal international policy. There were a lot of people who were coming to Mexico from Latin America—all the dictatorships and military governments. Mexico was taking those people. At the same time, Mexico was internally extremely repressed. You were very limited about your political involvement. I spent six years there. I almost finished high school in Mexico. At that time I moved to Puerto Rico because of family reasons and because things were very tough, economically. Mexico was just about to go through the end of the '80s.

We moved to Puerto Rico where I finished high school and did college. I went to college for economics. Coming from a tradition—my parents and also from Latin America—of understanding things from the Left, political economy was a key analysis of understanding how society works. But in Puerto Rico, as in the U.S., this was not the dominant approach in the economics departments.

I also spent that time really knowing Puerto Rico. That was the time that I really spent a good chunk of my life in Puerto Rico besides going for vacation. I was coming from this huge involvement in political movements. When I was in high school in Mexico we were extremely active in my school. We were organizing marches, remembering A. G. in Chile, protesting against the military in Argentina, supporting student movements in Mexico, doing literacy projects in the mountains of Oaxaca... we were politically active.

I arrived in Puerto Rico at a time in which there had been a huge university-student strike that was crushed three or four years before at the main university. As a result of that, people in general were very apolitical. So I not only got into a program—economics—that wasn't, as I thought, political economy, but it was also a university that was retreating and expelling a lot of the students who were involved in the strike.

It was an environment which was extremely apolitical. So I ended up spending those four years in Puerto Rico really knowing more about Puerto Rico. It was very different. It's a colonial society. For me, coming from Latin America, where there is this pride about national identity, Puerto Rico was always seen as the sellout. They obviously had a more stable economy than all that, but people would make jokes that Puerto Ricans didn't really speak Spanish well because it was mixed with English. That time actually helped me to understand a little better how tough it is to live in a colonial society. For the first twenty years of this last century they were not even allowed to be taught in their own language. They don't control their economy. It was a good way for me to start understanding.

As part of that I got very interested in understanding the United States better, especially because of immigration. There is huge immigration from Puerto Rico to the United States. There are almost more Puerto Ricans living in the United States than there are living on the island. So when